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The Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series

Miljenko Grgich

A CROATIAN-AMERICAN WINEMAKER IN THE NAPA VALLEY

With an Introduction by
Zelma Long

Interviews Conducted by
Ruth Teiser
in 1992



Miljenko Grgich, 1992

Photograph courtesy of The Wine Spectator

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Introduction by Zelma Long, President and CEO, Simi Winery.

Interviewed in 1992 by Ruth Teiser for the Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series, The Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

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PREFACE

The California wine industry oral history series, a project of the Regional Oral History Office, was initiated in 1969 through the action and with the financing of the Wine Advisory Board, a state marketing order organization which ceased operation in 1975. In 1983 it was reinstituted as The Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series with donations from The Wine Spectator Scholarship Foundation. The selection of those to be interviewed is made by a committee consisting of the director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; John A. De Luca, president of the Wine Institute, the statewide winery organization; Maynard A. Amerine, Emeritus Professor of Viticulture and Enology, University of California, Davis; the current chairman of the board of directors of the Wine Institute; Ruth Teiser, series project director; and Marvin R. Shanken, trustee of The Wine Spectator Scholarship Foundation.

The purpose of the series is to record and preserve information on California grape growing and winemaking that has existed only in the memories of wine men. In some cases their recollections go back to the early years of this century, before Prohibition. These recollections are of particular value because the Prohibition period saw the disruption of not only the industry itself but also the orderly recording and preservation of records of its activities. Little has been written about the industry from late in the last century until Repeal. There is a real paucity of information on the Prohibition years (1920-1933), although some commercial winemaking did continue under supervision of the Prohibition Department. The material in this series on that period, as well as the discussion of the remarkable development of the wine industry in subsequent years (as yet treated analytically in few writings) will be of aid to historians. Of particular value is the fact that frequently several individuals have discussed the same subjects and events or expressed opinions on the same ideas, each from his own point of view.

Research underlying the interviews has been conducted principally in the University libraries at Berkeley and Davis, the California State Library, and in the library of the Wine Institute, which has made its collection of in many cases unique materials readily available for the purpose.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to recent California history. The office is headed by Willa K. Baum and is under the administrative supervision of The Bancroft Library.

Ruth Teiser
Project Director
The Wine Spectator California Winemen
Oral History Series

July 1992
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CALIFORNIA WINE INDUSTRY INTERVIEWS
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- Maynard A. Amerine, The University of California and the State's Wine Industry, 1971
- Maynard A. Amerine, Wine Bibliographies and Taste Perception Studies, 1988
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- John B. Cella, The Cella Family in the California Wine Industry, 1986
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- William V. Cruess, A Half Century of Food and Wine Technology, 1967
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- William A. Dieppe, Almaden is My Life, 1985
- Making California Port Wine: Ficklin Vineyards from 1948 to 1992, interviews with David, Jean, Peter, and Steven Ficklin, 1992
- Alfred Fromm, Marketing California Wine and Brandy, 1984
- Louis Gomberg, Analytical Perspectives on the California Wine Industry, 1935-1990, 1990
- Miljenko Grgich, A Croatian-American Winemaker in the Napa Valley, 1992
- Joseph E. Heitz, Creating a Winery in the Napa Valley, 1986
- Maynard A. Joslyn, A Technologist Views the California Wine Industry, 1974
- Amandus N. Kasimatis, A Career in California Viticulture, 1988
- Morris Katz, Paul Masson Winery Operations and Management, 1944-1988, 1990
- Legh F. Knowles, Jr., Beaulieu Vineyards from Family to Corporate Ownership, 1990

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- Richard Maher, California Winery Management and Marketing, 1992
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- Peter Mondavi, Advances in Technology and Production at Charles Krug Winery. 1946-1988, 1990
- Robert Mondavi, Creativity in the Wine Industry, 1985
- Michael Moone, Management and Marketing at Beringer Vineyards and Wine World, Inc., 1990
- Myron S. Nightingale, Making Wine in California. 1944-1987, 1988
- Harold P. Olmo, Plant Genetics and New Grape Varieties, 1976
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- John A. Parducci, Six Decades of Making Wine in Mendocino County. California, 1992
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- Louis A. Petri, The Petri Family in the Wine Industry, 1971
- Jefferson E. Peyser, The Law and the California Wine Industry, 1974
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- Elie Skofis, California Wine and Brandy Maker, 1988
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- Brother Timothy, The Christian Brothers as Wine Makers, 1974
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- Ernest A. Wente, Wine Making in the Livermore Valley, 1971
- Albert J. Winkler, Viticultural Research at UC Davis (1921-1971), 1973
- John H. Wright, Domaine Chandon: The First French-owned California Sparkling Wine Cellar, includes an interview with Edmond Maudière, 1992

INTRODUCTION--by Zelma Long

Mike Grgich is truly an American success story. A Croatian immigrant, his California wine work in the 1950s and 1960s built upon his youthful experience and education in winemaking to create a solid foundation for his technical and business success. During the 1970s and 1980s, he grew into one of California's top winemakers, achieving great professional recognition and the personal success of his winery, Grgich Hills. Mike, at 54, was not a young man when he started Grgich Hills, in partnership with Austin Hills, and his success illustrates the American dream of rewards for perseverance, dedication to a goal, and plain hard work!

When I came to work for Mike at Robert Mondavi Winery in 1970, Robert Mondavi was a small winery crushing 1,700 tons of grapes. Mike's own domain, the laboratory, was a tiny room in the winery's renowned tower. At my first meeting with Mike, I found him tasting wine in barrels, stacked in the winery barrel room, a small room that is currently the Oakville facility's office! I worked with Mike in 1970, 1971, and 1972 as an apprentice winemaker and have since followed, with respect and admiration, his career. As I look back, Mike was a special and unusual combination of artist and scientist. He had done pioneer work with malolactic fermentation while working with André Tchelistcheff at Beaulieu Vineyard and was at home with a microscope, whether he was tracking the behavior of yeast or bacteria. I was fresh out of the University of California, Davis, after several years of studying the various aspects of technical winemaking and found Mike was easy to talk to about technical wine issues such as wine stability and wine composition, although he didn't express himself in the same way a scientist would. Mike always retained his European way of communicating about wine. He seemed to understand wine, not only from an analytical, technical sense but also from an intuitive sense.

Mike was a good teacher. He treated the grapes from each vineyard, and each wine, individually. As we would taste the fermenting wines and then the young wines, Mike would discuss their evolution from the perspective of the whole life of the wine: what he thought the particular personality of the wine was, its strengths and weaknesses, likely behavior, and the approaches to create or coax out a complex and harmonious wine.

At that time, California winemaking, in the modern sense, was just beginning. When I first came to Robert Mondavi, Mike was supervising the bottling of the 1969 Cabernet that became so famous when it won the Los Angeles Times tasting of California wines. Mike had laid his

professional imprint strongly upon this wine. Malolactic fermentation was a new concept in winemaking. The use of stainless steel tanks with temperature control was still a tool that was appreciated and not yet taken for granted. Neither skin contact nor barrel fermentation were part of the winemaking process for Chardonnay; and the use of French oak barrels in the aging of the wine had just begun. In this regard, Mike was a perfect complement to Robert Mondavi, bringing to the winery his own vision of oak aging as essential for fine wines.

As I look back on Mike's winemaking skills in the early 1970s, it's easy to see now that he had an unusually strong base on which to build the success he has achieved. At a time when most winemakers in the business were young and inexperienced, when there were very few older winemakers knowledgeable about fine European winemaking techniques, Mike had acquired through years of education and experience the technical skill and understanding and the artistic approach to winemaking that enabled him to produce refined, balanced, and expressive wines.

In the intervening twenty years, the California wine industry has boomed, expanded. A wine public capable of evaluating and appreciating California's efforts has emerged. California's international reputation for wine had changed. In the 1970s, Europeans viewed California wines as rustic; now they see them as fine, sophisticated, quality wines, important competitors in the world market. Mike's decisions to leave Robert Mondavi Winery for a lead winemaker position at Chateau Montelena, and ultimately to open Grgich Hills Winery in 1977, were timed to take advantage of this growth and development and reflected Mike's determination and personal evolution.

Since the birth of Grgich Hills Winery, Mike has not attempted to cast his net widely in activities; he has focused his time and effort on his wines and winery. His greatest reputation rests with his Chardonnay, a wine widely respected by both the wine trade and the consumer. It is one of the most popular Chardonnays of California, despite a relatively high bottle price for this varietal. His winery is solid, thoughtfully designed, well located, but not flashy. His vineyards surround his home and the home of this partner, Austin Hills. A prominent wine publication, The Wine Spectator, recently acknowledged Mike as one of California's premier winemakers, appreciated not only for his Chardonnay but his Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, and Sauvignon Blanc. He has a master's touch, and his success has been well earned and well deserved.

Zelma Long
President, Simi Winery

May 1992
Healdsburg, California

INTERVIEW HISTORY--Miljenko (Mike) Grgich

The interview with Miljenko (Mike) Grgich was held in two sessions, the first the afternoon of March 3, 1992, the second the following morning, March 4, both at his home near Yountville. The gracious house, built in 1885, with high ceilings and tall windows, is flanked by vines and an attractively landscaped garden where he often entertains.

The interviewer, who knew Mr. Grgich by reputation and through articles in the press, had met him earlier in 1992 on a shuttle bus ride en route to a preview of the Opus One winery in Oakville. Cheerful and outgoing, he responded to my inquiries, giving in effect a brief preview of his interview. As the interview itself attests, he proved to be an informative narrator, cooperative in speaking about the subjects suggested in advance, and in adding relevant information.

He was similarly responsive in reading over the interview transcript. Both he and his daughter, Violet Grgich, made some changes. Although he speaks English very expressively, Mr. Grgich's conversation is still reminiscent of the fact that his native language is Croatian. Some of his untraditional English expressions were reworded by his daughter, still retaining their meaning. He himself clarified other statements by replacing words and phrases with more exact ones. There were no extensive changes.

The frontispiece photograph of Mr. Grgich is through the courtesy of The Wine Spectator. The rest of the photographs were chosen from an assortment very kindly supplied by Violet Grgich.

Thanks are due to Zelma Long, who contributed the informative and appreciative introduction to this interview with her fellow winemaker.

Ruth Teiser,
Interviewer/Editor

July 1992
Regional Oral History Office
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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name Miljenko Grgich

Date of birth April 1, 1923 Birthplace Desne, Croatia

Father's full name Nikola Grgich

Occupation Winemaker Birthplace Desne, Croatia

Mother's full name Ivka Batinovic

Occupation Housewife Birthplace Desne, Croatia

Your spouse single

Your children Violet Grgich

Where did you grow up? Desne, Croatia

Present community Yountville, California

Education University of Zagreb, Yugoslavia

Occupation(s) Winemaker

Areas of expertise Wine Chemist, Wine Microbiologist, Vineyardist, Winemaker,
Marketing, Specializing in Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, and Fumé
Blanc

Other interests or activities Bocce Ball, Bowling, Fishing, Walking

Organizations in which you are active American Enologists, Knights of the Vine

EARLY YEARS IN CROATIA, 1923-1954

[Interview 1: March 3, 1992]##¹

Teiser: When were you were born?

Grgich: April 1, 1923.

Teiser: And you were born at Desne in Croatia?

Grgich: Yes, it's a village of about a thousand people. My father was a farmer and was growing grapes and making wine. He was growing wheat, corn, and lots of vegetables, and he had sheep and cows. It was a little farm.

Teiser: You grew up on the farm?

Grgich: Yes, very luckily, because as a child I started to learn about life, working on the farm. I was a shepherd when I was six years old, taking care of sheep, and I was stomping grapes when I was two or three years old. I remember that stomping grapes was the first job I had. When it was the harvest, everybody works, even children, and the children learn skills little by little every year. When you start at two or three years old, by ten years old you know everything your father knows; not that you have physical power, but you have experience.

Unfortunately, in the towns in civilized countries, children go to school and go to school, and they have no experience. They study something, but they don't have a real touch with Mother Nature or with real facts, with life, or with the climate--rain,

¹This symbol (##) indicates that a tape or a segment of a tape has begun or ended. For a guide to the tapes refer to the page following this transcript.

wind, snow--the horses, the cows, the sheep, vegetables, the river and the floods, the mountains, lakes, fish. So I was fortunate to live among these things. It was a great experience.

Teiser: What kind of area was it?

Grgich: It was a coastal region, about five miles from the coast. At the same time, there was a river and a lake pretty close. My house was about five hundred yards above the lake, where we fished. And there was a river we fished in, and we fished in the ocean. Fishing, fishing, fishing! [laughs]

Teiser: Did you have any special interests as a kid?

Grgich: I was always interested in doing a good job. Even if I was a kid of six years old, I had an interest in my sheep coming home full. Every day I would find someplace where I could fill their tummies, so when I got them home I knew they had the best that I could give them. So from the very beginning, it was my urge to do the best.

Teiser: Did your father make you think that way?

Grgich: Yes, my father always said, "Don't worry if you're not rich, and don't worry if you have no college degree. As long as you do what you are doing today better than yesterday and a little better tomorrow and every day forward in one year, in 365 days you will acquire a noticeable amount of improvement, knowledge which will keep you going toward success."

Teiser: How did your father make a living? Did he sell his products on the open market?

Grgich: He made a living mainly by producing food that he needed and then selling wine. He would drink half and sell half--drink the best and sell the rest. He was very smart. In our country, you give the best product to your family and friends, and then you sell the rest. When I came abroad, I found the opposite; they sell the best, and they eat the rest. What a different philosophy between the countries. [laughs]

Teiser: The political climate in Croatia when you were young--

Grgich: It was Yugoslavia then.

Teiser: When you were growing up there, was it an open, free market?

Grgich: It was a semi-free market. It was still a kind of dictatorship by the Serbian king. We did suffer under the dictatorship of the Serbian king. Yugoslavia was established in 1918 as the Kingdom

of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. These were to be equal, but when the country was established, only Serbs were at the top, and the others were below. That lasted until some Croatian politicians started to complain, and in 1928 in parliament in Belgrade, the Yugoslavian capital, they killed Stjepan Radić, a Croatian leader, and three other Croatian representatives who were asking for equality and democracy. On his dying bed he gave recommendation to other Croatian leaders: "Never to Belgrade again!"

But the Serbian king, instead of giving equality, established a dictatorship in January 1929, and he transferred the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes into Yugoslavia--Yugoslavia did not exist until 1929--and it was even more dictatorial than before. That situation never has been improved until about 1938, when war was roaming around; everybody knew there would be a war. Then Croatia was given a partial independence. Policemen could then be Croatian, whereas they were mainly Serbian before. Policemen and local officers could be Croats, and the country really started to bloom emotionally, because we finally felt we were human beings with the rights of human beings.

But that didn't last long, because the war started, and there were five years of war. Italy occupied Dalmatia, Germany occupied the rest of Yugoslavia, and it was five years of guerilla war all around Yugoslavia. At the end, the Communists won, with the support of the West and the Russian army. You see, they never would have won without the support of the West. Churchill sent his own son to Yugoslavia to organize these partisans, but when he came back to London, he said, "Pa, all those people over there in Yugoslavia are Communists; they are Red." Churchill told him, "Are you going to live there?" In other words, who cares what Yugoslavia will become, as long as Britain is being helped by it. That's how small countries have always been treated, not for human rights but just to be of some use.

Teiser: You went to the University of Zagreb?

Grgich: Yes, I graduated from the business college first. After the war there was a need for bookkeepers, and they were well paid. I went to business school and was a bookkeeper for one year.

Teiser: What year was that?

Grgich: It was long ago. [thinking] From 1948 to 1949 I was a bookkeeper.



Six-year-old Miljenko Grgich photographed at his family farm at Desne, Yugoslavia, 1929.

STUDYING ENOLOGY AND VITICULTURE, 1949-1954

Grgich: In 1949 I entered the University of Zagreb and graduated in 1954. I was studying enology and viticulture.

Teiser: When you were working on your family farm, did you make wine?

Grgich: Yes. I stomped the grapes. I don't think I would have been born if my father didn't need my feet to stomp the grapes, because they didn't have machinery in those days. I remember that, ever since I was three or four years old, every year--never missed harvest.

Teiser: Did you particularly like winemaking?

Grgich: Yes. I liked the wine. My mama kept me on breast milk until age two and a half, because I was the last kid--the eleventh. One day I misbehaved, and I knew she would punish me. She said, "No more milk," and I thought I was going to die. She said, "No, you are not going to die. I'll switch you from milk to wine." So I always had diluted wine at the table--half water, half wine--because in those days they didn't have chlorine to sanitize water. But they knew that if they mixed wine into the water, the wine would sanitize it and kids wouldn't have a stomach ache. So I started to drink wine as early as I can remember. I liked it, and I still like it.

Teiser: Wasn't it unusual for someone from a family like yours to go to the university?

Grgich: It was unusual because none of my ten brothers and sisters went to the university. I was the only one, but I think I had something in my genes to improve every day and do something better every day. I'm not stopping yet; I'm still learning.

Teiser: Was it expensive to go to the university?

Grgich: It wasn't expensive because I ate very little; I worked and studied. I had no mother or father [to help support me] when I was at the university. I worked. I worked at an institute in genetics. I was learning about genetics, and at the same time I was making some money. My room was built a hundred years ago for the maids. It was a little room, maybe three yards wide and ten yards long. So my expenses were very small. I didn't have a car or a bike. Nowadays even people on welfare have a car, everybody has a bike. I was not on welfare; I was making my own living. If you have to, you can live with little money.

Teiser: I suppose you were willing to.

Grgich: I knew that I had to suffer. The only lucky thing I have in my life is that I know that in life one has to suffer, and I accepted suffering as a part of life. One poet says, "The spoon of the honey asks for the spoon of the bitter," and the mixture of bitter and sweet is best to drink. Fortunately, I accepted that, and I'm still accepting suffering. When I make my wines and have to get up at three o'clock in the morning, I get up. Many people say, "Oh, it's cold outside," but not for me; I am used to suffering, and I don't suffer in suffering. I knew that after rain must come the sunshine.

Teiser: What did you study at the university?

Grgich: General agricultural subjects for two years; organic, inorganic, analytical chemistry; physics, mathematics, biology, genetics, botany, biology, microbiology, soil microbiology--lots of subjects which are helpful to me now. One day I was at a doctor's office in San Francisco, and he noticed that I understood microbiology. He asked me if I had studied to be a doctor, and I said, "No, I studied agriculture." There are bugs wherever you are, which are an important part of life.

Teiser: Were there any outstanding teachers you had who influenced you?

Grgich: One of them was a chemistry professor, Marko Mohacek. He was a guy who had enormous energy. He was teaching us chemistry, but he had his own experimental farm where he was selecting the different kinds of potatoes, tomatoes, wine selections. He was an expert in wine. We had Professor Stefanich in enology, but if we needed something really serious, we would go to Marko Mohacek. He had such good taste. I remember one time I brought him some wine, and he tasted it and said, "Mike, it seems good to me. I can't find anything wrong with it." Ten minutes later he came back to me and said, "Mike, I have an aftertaste of something. Did you ever put sugar in the wine?" I said yes, and he said, "I feel it on my tongue."

And he loved students. At that time there were no books published in the subjects; the professors would just teach you, and you would catch as much as you could. But he had a book for all his subjects, written by him--in organic chemistry, inorganic chemistry, analytical chemistry, biochemistry. He was also knowledgeable in pedology and microbiology. He was a tremendous person, with a sharp, energetic mind. He could take anything; he was well educated.

And, you know, the Communists laid him off two months before retirement just so he wouldn't get full retirement. That may be the reason why I came to America, because I was one of those students who went to the dean to ask that he be kept on until we passed our examination with him. Five of us students went to the dean, asking that they let him stay another six months so that we, who were learning from him, could pass our examinations. After that the secret police started to follow me around. I was very much in danger, and I was scared to death. So I got out of the country to West Germany.

WEST GERMANY, 1954-1956

Teiser: What year did you leave college?

Grgich: In 1954.

Teiser: What did you do next?

Grgich: I went to West Germany.

Teiser: What did you do there?

Grgich: I went to West Germany to get to America. I was an exchange student for two months, but I never came back to Yugoslavia from Germany.

Teiser: What did you study then?

Grgich: I was on a farm in Germany. I studied mainly genetics--production of new varieties.

Teiser: André Tchelistcheff was involved in a somewhat similar international education program.

Grgich: We have been involved in many of the same things, because we did not have a home; we have been just shuffled with the wind. You can only be in one place at a time.

Teiser: How long did you stay in Germany?

Grgich: Eighteen months. I found out that getting a visa for the United States was very hard in those days. There was a very small quota for Yugoslavia, so you had to wait until your quota opened up. I thought it might take a long time, and somebody suggested that I go to Canada.

CANADA, 1956-1958

Grgich: The Canadian consulate gave me a visa immediately, so I went to Vancouver.

Teiser: What did you do there?

Grgich: Oh, anything to make my living. I had some connection with Vancouver College. They gave me a job as a dishwasher and waiter. [laughs] I apologized, saying, "I didn't study to be dishwasher or a waiter," because in Europe you have to study for six years to be trained to be a waiter. They said, "Never mind. Show up tomorrow morning," and gave me an apron.

Teiser: Did you like Vancouver?

Grgich: Yes, it is a very nice climate. It's on the ocean and is very interesting. It's more American than any other Canadian town.

Teiser: Did you feel free? Was it a place where there was freedom for you?

Grgich: I knew it was not the last destination for me; I knew it was temporary. But I had found freedom, and I had found progress. In the evening I would go up in the hills and look down at all the lights in the business district. In the old country there were no lights, and how many lights you see in Vancouver by night. And nobody is there working; it's just the lights.

I noted that productivity in Canada was much better than in the old country. When I started to dry a glass, I would take the glass and a rag, and I would look at the glass, dry it, look at it. While I dried one glass, the other waiter dried twelve. He would just take the glass and wipe it [demonstrates a quick swipe, taking another glass, a quick swipe, etc.]. I remember I wrote a letter to my friend in the old country and said, "People are paid here much more than in our country, but they produce much more."

LEARNING ABOUT CALIFORNIA

Teiser: Were you hoping to get to California?

Grgich: Oh, yes.

Teiser: How did you know about California in connection with wine?

Grgich: We read geography a great deal in our country, and we learned about the whole world. You ask some American student who is graduating from high school, "Where is Czechoslovakia?" They might not know whether it is in Asia or Europe. But in Europe, geography was a very important subject, and you learned about every country in the world. So I knew about California, and many of my countrymen had a connection with California. The professor who was teaching us fruit growing was in California three months before I graduated. When he came back, we all gathered around him and asked, "How is California?"

Teiser: So you know something about the conditions here?

Grgich: Oh, yes, and I knew there was wine here.

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Grgich: I knew there was wine in California, that the soil was fertile, and that there was drought once in a while. This professor told us, "You have in California a garden of Eden where there is water; where there is no water, everything is yellow. So water is a very important factor in California."

Teiser: What made you think that California was good for making wine?

Grgich: I have to come back to the fact that I had relatives in the United States; my mother had three brothers here in the United States, my father had a brother and their relatives here, and my older sister

was in Washington State. So America to us was the hope and beacon of freedom. Every year they would send us for Christmas and Easter a few dollars; there were always a few dollars dripping from America into our homes. So America was a place where I believed I could utilize my natural ability--my genes--and besides have freedom.

Freedom is something that attracted me here. Because when I was in Yugoslavia we had two dictatorships on our backs, Serbian and Communist. If you were not a Communist or a Serb, you were out of luck; you never could become a professor or have a job as a director of something. I couldn't see that ever, in my life, it would change, because Communism was still progressing at that time. They were telling us that they were taking over the whole world, and they did so until [Ronald] Reagan came into power as president of the U.S.A. Since he came to power, no country fell under Communism. Bush is now glorifying himself that he broke the back of Communism, but it was Reagan who did it. We all paid for it, but I like to give credit where credit belongs. He started to arm the U.S.A., so Russia has had to arm, putting them on thin ice; they had to spend money they didn't have for arms. So they were spending money for arms and didn't have bread. That's what broke down Communism. Whether anybody likes Reagan or not, I give him credit for eliminating Communism as a menace in the world.

Teiser: When you left Yugoslavia, were you hoping to head for California?

Grgich: Yes, in my mind I was heading for California.

TO CALIFORNIA, 1958-1977

Working for Lee Stewart, 1958

Teiser: And were you thinking of being in the wine industry?

Grgich: Yes. Not necessarily in the Napa Valley, but while I was in Canada I heard that the Napa Valley was the place. So I came from Vancouver straight to Napa Valley to work for Mr. Lee [J. Leland] Stewart at the old Souverain up near Angwin; now it is Burgess Cellars.

Teiser: How did you make that connection? How did you know about Lee Stewart?

Grgich: I placed an ad in the Wine Institute [bulletin], looking for work, and he answered my ad. So we connected, and I came straight to work for him.

Teiser: You were lucky, weren't you? That was a good--

Grgich: I've been lucky all my life. If I look at my brothers and sisters, my father, and my mother, I was the luckiest in my family.

Teiser: Stewart was a big influence in California winemaking, as I understand it. Why was that?

Grgich: Yes. He was a man who had drive; probably no matter what he did, he would have drive, but when he started to make wine he had a strong drive to make the best that he could. He was very similar to me: "Do your best." There was no second in him, just the best. Because his methods were the best, he became the best. You don't become best by accident; you have to work hard to be the best.

Teiser: Quite a number of people worked for him and were influenced by him. Did you know some of the others?

Grgich: Yes, Warren Winiarski started with him. Winiarski and Mike Grgich are the two that I know of who have succeeded in winemaking. Winiarski's Cabernet and my Chardonnay came in first place at the Paris tasting of 1976, the so-called Spurier tasting, so we have something in common; we have both worked for Lee Stewart, André Tchelistcheff, and Robert Mondavi. We worked for all these guys, and the result was the fruit; if you work, you get some fruit out of it.

Teiser: Was Stewart hard to work for?

Grgich: Oh, very hard. He asked for perfection--and perfection in cleanliness and performance. When I came to America I found out that European and American winemaking were different. I was lucky to find him and not somebody who was sloppy. He was so precise in everything; everything had to be done in a particular way--not a second way, only one way, the best way, and that's the way you had to do it.

Teiser: How did Stewart learn to make wine?

Grgich: From André Tchelistcheff, and he made wine better than André Tchelistcheff, because Tchelistcheff had a bigger place and more people were involved. But Stewart had only himself and one assistant, so he would do the job the best he knew how, whereas André would not do the job; he would just tell somebody else how to do it. How that somebody else did it was how it got done, so Lee had the advantage of André Tchelistcheff.

Teiser: I hear people refer to Stewart so often, and we haven't recorded much about him.

Grgich: He was a very special man. If you judge him to be a good human being, I will tell you a joke. One friend of mine said that Lee Stewart had ulcers--always problems with his stomach. My friend was talking to him and asked, "Lee, do you have any problem with your heart?" He said, "No, I have no problem with my heart." My friend said, "I know you have no problem with your heart because you have no heart." [laughs] For Stewart his winemaking was more important than he was or his health. He was totally devoted to what he was doing.

Teiser: Did he have any particular style of winemaking?

Grgich: He learned from André Tchelistcheff, and he would go by that every year, year after year. He would do everything the same so that he

didn't make a mistake, because his knowledge wasn't like that of André Tchelistcheff, where he could move to the left or the right. He would stick to the known path, and that way he developed his style; he always made wine the same way. Robert Mondavi every year makes something different, so Robert Mondavi has no style. But Lee Stewart did have a style, because he would make Johannisberg Riesling, which he was known for, exactly in that style, year after year--his Cabernet and Chardonnay, every wine had special style. He didn't have big machinery to help him, but he developed his style, by which he would make every year wine of his style.

Teiser: Is that good?

Grgich: Yes. Wineries have to have a style. If we all dressed the same, like in China, life wouldn't be interesting, and if every winemaker made the same wine, it wouldn't be interesting. Every winery has to have its own style.

Teiser: How long were you with Lee Stewart?

Grgich: Not long--about four months.

Teiser: Did you learn a lot in that short a time?

Grgich: Oh, yes, a great deal, because it was a crush time. You learn most at the crush. I would pick the grapes by day, crush them in the evening, and cool the juice by night.

Teiser: Why did you leave him?

Grgich: I had a kind of obligation to the Christian Brothers, because they had something to do with my coming here, the same as Lee Stewart did. I was living in very poor conditions up on the hill near Souverain winery. I got in touch immediately with the Christian Brothers when I arrived in Napa Valley, and they actually suggested to my nephew in Seattle that he place an ad in the Wine Institute bulletin. So I felt that they had something to do with my finding a position with Lee Stewart. I didn't have a car and couldn't shop, so it was very hard for me to live up on the hill at Souverain.

Christian Brothers, 1959

Grgich: So I moved down to St. Helena, and I could walk to Greystone Winery. I walked there and back, one or two miles every day; it was good exercise.

Teiser: Whom did you work under there?

Grgich: It was Brother Timothy [Diener], who was the main winemaker, and Auguste Pirio, who was the immediate manager. He is retired now. My job was to help on the champagne bottling line, anything that was necessary to do around, making champagne, bottling champagne, shipping champagne. I was working in the champagne department on the third floor of Greystone winery at St. Helena.

Teiser: Was it interesting?

Grgich: It was interesting, but I still didn't see that it was my place. On one of my days off I went to see André Tchelistcheff, because I knew he was an immigrant, like me. You know, you try to find somebody who is like you, who understands you. I told him that I was working for Christian Brothers. They had one chemist and one winemaker, who would stay there forever; there are no openings, as there might be many other places where somebody stays for two or three years and moves. At Christian Brothers, people stay there forever, and I didn't see that I would ever have a chance to become either a wine chemist or a winemaker.

I told André I was looking for a better job, and he took my name. In about a month he called me and said his wine chemist was sick, and if I wanted to come to work in the lab for him, there was an opening. So I came in, but I didn't have any experience in using the lab equipment.

Teiser: Before you get onto Beaulieu, let me take you back to the Christian Brothers. How long were you there?

Grgich: About a year.

Teiser: Did their wines have a special style, and can you characterize it?

Grgich: At that time, yes. The red wine especially was the best buy on the market. It was well aged and well styled. If they had a wine tasting, there would always be lots of people there to taste their wines at that time, when Brother Timothy was young and the winery was smaller.

Teiser: Brother Timothy didn't believe in vintage dating, did he?

Grgich: Yes and no. He switched back and forth. He liked good wine, so whichever way it came---. He had very strict German blood, was very honest, and a hard worker. He would expect everybody to work hard.

Teiser: Was he easy to work for?

Grgich: Oh, medium.

Beaulieu Vineyard, 1959-1968

Teiser: So then you went to André, and he said to come.

Grgich: He said, "Come and work." I said, "How can I work? I did these tests in the laboratory in my country, but all the equipment was different and the tests were different." I said, "André, can you do one test for me, and I'll watch how you do it. Then I will be able to do it myself." André said, "I have no time." They brought me twenty-five samples of the red wine to analyze, total analysis--sugar, alcohol, acid, tannins. I couldn't figure out how to do even one analysis, so he gave me the book, and I started one by one--reading the book, do the test once, do it a second time, do it a third time. If I could repeat it, I knew I was doing okay. I looked in the book to see what their results were the last time the wine was analyzed, what their reading was, and see how it compared to my analysis.

So I learned from scratch each of those analyses. In a week I analyzed all of those twenty-five bottles. I would come by bus in the morning from St. Helena at six o'clock instead of eight, and I would work until six o'clock in the evening. André told me, "I know that you are not experienced, but I'll give you two months. If you make it in two months, you'll stay. If you don't make it, don't blame me." After two months I was very anxious to see what André would say. He said, "You will get a raise." I asked how much, and he said, "Twenty-five cents an hour." I asked if I would stay, and he said, "Yes, you will stay here." That twenty-five cents was the most remembered raise in my life. If I stayed there I knew I had a good job, and if I didn't, who knows where I might have gone.

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Teiser: I should ask you to pronounce your first name, Miljenko.

Grgich: "Meelyenko." I shortened it to Mike, because my language is phonetic. Everybody knows "Mike." Now finally I'm coming back with Miljenko, and most people don't ask me how to spell it.

Teiser: Before you went to Beaulieu you had experienced two wineries which must have been different from each other.



Miljenko Grgich in the laboratory at Beaulieu Vineyard, circa 1965.

Grgich: Yes.

Teiser: Was Stewart's Souverain highly mechanized?

Grgich: Very simple, but very organized and very precise.

Teiser: How about the Christian Brothers?

Grgich: It was a larger place, where you saw more mechanization but less care and personal involvement.

Teiser: How did Beaulieu compare to them?

Grgich: Beaulieu was a unique winery because it was founded by the French. Through the decades it developed the French style of winemaking. It was something different, something unique.

Teiser: It was closer to the European tradition?

Grgich: Yes, and a stable place. If you found a job there, you were there forever. The relationships among the people were good and its productivity was average, but everybody knew that if you did your job you would not be laid off, because they had a vineyard and a winery, and they needed so many people. During the slowness of the year they would find something for everyone to do. So once you were there and did decent work, you could retire there; you had no worry about being fired or laid off. It was a stable place, like in Europe; you worked there, and your son worked there.

Teiser: What year did you go there?

Grgich: In 1959 I joined Beaulieu Vineyard. I came to Napa Valley in August 1958 and stayed with Stewart about four months and then stayed with the Christian Brothers until late in the year of '59. After the harvest I joined Beaulieu Vineyard and was there for nine years, until 1968.

Teiser: In 1959, was André still experimenting?

Grgich: He was still experimenting.

Advances in Frost Protection

Grgich: While I was there we always had some project going on. For instance, in 1960 and '61 we started to protect vineyards from the frost. That was the beginning of these wind machines, smudge

pots, and sprinklers in Napa Valley. We started with old rubber tires and burned them in the vineyard, and then we tried bales of straw. Finally we got wind machines and smudge pots. We never got sprinklers for Beaulieu Vineyard, but conditions were progressively being improved so that the grapes wouldn't freeze and we could have a crop every year. If you have a developed market, you have to have so many cases of Cabernet, for example, to supply your market. If you don't make the wine, somebody will take you off of their wine list. So it was very important to have a constant supply for your customers.

That was one project that I was a part of. I was working by day in the winery and by night in the vineyard, running around like a rabbit from thermometer to thermometer, measuring temperature in order to know when to light smudge pots--put them down, start with the machines, put them down. Many times I would work by day in the winery and by night in the vineyard.

Improvements in White Wines

Grgich: At that time white wines were mainly dry sauterne and chablis--very poor quality. Those wines would be good for six months on the shelf, and then they would oxidize and be worthless. I started, and André started at the same time, to improve white wines by using different methods of caring for those wines and establishing a better way to make them and to protect them. And we made a miracle; in '61 we already had a good wine, so that when his son [Dimitri] came from Gallo to visit, he was impressed with how we had improved the white wines. We were using cool fermentation for white wines and settling them to eliminate sediment; if they don't have a sediment during fermentation they are much fruitier.

Teiser: What were you using then?

Grgich: We settled wine in the tanks overnight, and then in the morning we would rack clear juice into another tank and would add specially selected yeast for white wine. That was another significant improvement which was done while I was there.

Sterile Bottling

Grgich: We also started with sterile bottling. When you bottle wine, some bacteria or yeast might go through the filter. At that time the millipore filter had been developed, the filter that no yeast or no bacteria would go through; every pore is calibrated, and the

pores are smaller than any bacteria or yeast. Millipore sterile filtration.

I was part of developing use of millipore sterile filtration. We were doing that first in the wine industry. Gallo tried and couldn't do it immediately. Italian Swiss Colony tried and couldn't make it, but we succeeded right away. Millipore [the manufacturer] was very happy that they were established someplace, from whence they spread to the whole wine industry and to the beer industry, too. We learned how to do it because we were being as precise as Lee Stewart in our approach. Both of us were microbiologists, and we knew what we were doing.

Teiser: At Beaulieu you were doing the opposite of what Lee Stewart had been doing. He kept doing the same thing, and at Beaulieu you were trying new things.

Induced Malolactic Fermentation

Grgich: That's right. We were the first in California to induce malolactic fermentation in all red wines at will. It was usually going by itself--going or not going--but we learned how to propagate the starter and add to wine proper amounts of starter at optimum temperature. Use of paper chromatography helped to observe malolactic fermentation. I had been working six months in the lab with twelve French cultures, and finally we chose one that was from UC California at Davis, ML 34. We started it and fermented all the red wines in two months by our will, by inducing with the starter produced in the laboratory. That was an achievement! Before that some wineries had been doing this in their labs on a small scale, but this was the first time it was done in an industrial way in a California winery--in 1962.

Teiser: These were things that didn't exist when you were studying. You got in on a changing period.

Quality Control

Grgich: Growing. That's what life is about. Life is not for sitting down. Life is moving and getting better, improving. At Beaulieu Vineyard André and I established quality control; I was the first quality control person in the Napa Valley. Quality control means to control the grapes in the vineyard, to control when to pick them and when to crush them, when they are fermenting, when they are being fined, racked, bottled--all the way through. That gave me a chance to observe the wine from the beginning to the end of the winemaking process. Many winemakers stay in the winery and

never see the vineyard, but I was associated with the vineyard and everything that was connected with the wine. Even if somebody returned a bottle to us, I had to analyze it under a microscope to see whether there was any spoilage. So I controlled the whole circle, and that gave me experience for nine years that I used since then to make better wines year after year.

Teiser: I think quality control is something that Zelma Long has been working on at Simi winery.

Grgich: Yes, I hired her when I was at Robert Mondavi and trained her.

Teiser: André himself was always interested in everything from the vineyard on, wasn't he?

Grgich: Yes. He was more a viticulturist than a winemaker. But, you know, André worked at a time when there were not many other quality winemakers. André Tchelistcheff made superior wines in those days because nobody else knew how to do it better. If you had André Tchelistcheff make wines today, those wines would be on a par with the wines of today because we have progressed so much.

Robert Mondavi Winery, 1968-1972

Grgich: When I moved from André Tchelistcheff to Robert Mondavi, Professor [Harold] Berg came to Mondavi and tasted some of the white wines which I had made there. He said, "André, you have to go over there and taste those wines." I brought from André Tchelistcheff the French technique, particularly for red wine. Robert Mondavi was much more experimenting, whereas at Beaulieu Vineyard most things were done repetitiously. At Robert Mondavi you just moved; you didn't see your tail, because your tail was disappearing as you were charging forward.

I used my experience from Beaulieu Vineyard working for Robert Mondavi. The first Cabernet that I made for Robert Mondavi, '69, was tasted by the fifteen California winemakers under Robert Balzer from the Los Angeles Times. That Cabernet was proclaimed to be the best Cabernet in California. I introduced malolactic fermentation and some other methods from Beaulieu Vineyard to Robert Mondavi. Since I had more freedom there than I had at Beaulieu Vineyard, I really bloomed there.

Teiser: You said you were lucky, and I'm sure you were, but I'm also sure you were a very willing worker and a very willing learner all

through this. A lot of people could have gone through those jobs and just gone straight ahead without broadening.

Grgich: Yes, I was enjoying living, and by living I mean moving, learning every day something, doing something better. People ask me why I work at sixty-eight years old. All my colleagues who started with me retired ten years ago. I say that I haven't made the perfect wine yet, and I'm shooting for that. I'm just joking, because I know I will never make the perfect wine; there is no such thing. Nothing is perfect; only God is perfect.

Teiser: Could you have gone on forever at Beaulieu if you had wanted to?

Grgich: I had no choice, because André Tchelistcheff had a son, Dimitri. Whether it was true or not, I understood that his son applied for his job. When I heard that, I understood; if it were my son, I would give him my job. I didn't complain about it, but I knew that I could not stay there and have a chance for the winemaker's job.

So I went to Robert Mondavi's, where he had two sons [laughs], and there wasn't much chance there, either.

Teiser: How did you get in touch with Robert Mondavi?

Grgich: I was very much charmed by his new building. It was something new. It was the first winery built after Prohibition, very nice, very clean, very stylish. Since he was my neighbor there, when I knew that I had no room to go forward at Beaulieu Vineyard, my choice was to go to a place like that which had something new to offer. He had stainless steel tanks, French barrels, and very interesting new things that he started in the winery.

I asked him for a job, and he didn't hesitate. He said, "I'm going to make out of you a little André Tchelistcheff." So we started to work together, and we did a great job. After that Cabernet '69, which was judged to be the best Cabernet in California, his image and his sales just jumped skyward. He believes that that pushed him ten years ahead from where he had been. I was proud that I came to the place where my energy was meeting his energy. He's much more energetic than I am. I did well there until he started to grow too big. After four years he tenfolded production.

Teiser: When you went there first in '68, what did the winery consist of?

Grgich: Just the original little building, and many tanks were outside. I remember one day a Wine Institute safety inspector came to visit us. I told all my people that the Wine Institute safety inspector

was coming, "Watch out that he doesn't catch you." My foreman went up to the tank outside--just a twenty-thousand-gallon tank--on the portable ladder, and he was so scared that he fell down from the top of the tank with the ladder and everything. I thought, "Why now?" [laughs] "Why didn't this happen to you later?"

Mondavi had lots of tanks outside for a while--roto tanks and other stainless steel tanks.

Teiser: He made wine without a building?

Grgich: He had some tanks inside a building and many outside. It was very hard to work that way. He was budding out, even though he didn't have a building over all tanks. In four years he was so successful that I as a precision winemaker could not take care of all his wines; it was just too much wine for me. I asked him to hire another winemaker who would take care of the inferior wine; I would just take care of Cabernet and Chardonnay and let somebody else take the rest. But he didn't want to do that. He said, "Mike, I know you can handle it." I said, "I know I cannot, because I am not happy if some mistake comes and I cannot control it. I want to have total control and perfect wines." I was a perfectionist.

At that time the two men from Los Angeles, [Ernest W.] Hahn and [James L.] Barrett, bought Chateau Montelena and were looking for a winemaker. Mr. [Leland J.] Paschich knew me, and he came down so I could give him some yeast starter for his wine that he was making up at the winery. He said, "Mike, I have partners, and they would like to talk to you." I asked about what, and he said, "We have a winery, but we have no winemaker." With André Tchelistcheff's son in front of me and Robert Mondavi's two sons in front of me, it wasn't hard for me to make the appointment. I found the place empty, neglected for fifty years, no winemaker in sight. Mr. Barrett said, "You can have all of this, and you will be the winemaker and vineyardist, all on your own, and you will be a limited partner."

Teiser: Let me go back to the Robert Mondavi Winery. When were they started?

Grgich: They started in '66.

Teiser: So they had made several vintages?

Grgich: Yes.

Teiser: Were they doing well?

Grgich: I wouldn't consider it so from those two vintages. But after the '69 Cabernet was proclaimed the best Cabernet in California--and the Johannisberg Riesling '69 was supposed to be the best in California--suddenly his name climbed up, and he deserved it.

Teiser: So he really needed you?

Grgich: Oh, definitely. He wouldn't have hired me if he didn't need me. But in a few years he needed more than me. I hired Zelma about two years after I started working there, and she was my assistant, first part time and then full time. Both of us worked very hard. We had three shifts working during crush, and I had to control all of them. In my dreams I knew what they were doing over there. It was very hard.

Teiser: Were your aims the same as Robert Mondavi's aims? Did you agree upon the kind of wines you should make?

Grgich: We were friendly about it. We did not differ much in what we had been doing.

Experimenting

Teiser: There again there were lots of experiments, weren't there?

Grgich: Oh, yes.

Teiser: Did you carry them out to their ends, or did you just start some things and then give them up?

Grgich: When I came to Robert Mondavi I was more shaped by the Beaulieu Vineyard way of experimenting, which was to do them one at a time in an organized fashion. At Robert Mondavi's, many experiments were going at the same time, just rushing around, and nobody had total control. That was not my style, and I didn't enjoy them as much as I enjoyed the experiments at Beaulieu Vineyard, because at Beaulieu Vineyard we did one experiment at a time. You started it, you improved it, and you made it work. You had total control. However, Robert Mondavi had roto tanks, something new that nobody had. The first year he said, "My wines are so good because of roto tanks." The next year he bought centrifuge and said, "Now my wines are good because of the centrifuge." Then he bought a filter and said, "Now my wines are so good because of the filter" and forgot about the roto tanks and centrifuge. He was just charging forward. For me it was a little faster than I would do myself.

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Teiser: That's what happens with someone who has a million ideas, isn't it?

Grgich: He had twice as many ideas as I did. I did have some, but not as many as he did. But I did benefit from those experiments which we did there. People ask me, "Mike, how do you know these things?" I say, "I have benefited from working for Lee Stewart, who was at that time the best winemaker in the Napa Valley; I have benefited from working with André Tchelistcheff, because he was the best winemaker in the Napa Valley; and I worked at Robert Mondavi, the best experimental winery in the Napa Valley." I am so lucky that I have touched all these people myself, and some of these things I learned with them I took with me, and they are a part of me. All these things, together with my experiments as a villager, as a farmer, as a fisherman, and all the other things I have done contributed to my success. I walk to the top of Mt. St. Helena whenever I have the chance. Walking in the fresh air; seeing birds and flowers, probably makes my life richer than many other people's.

Teiser: I should think so. And all in the Napa Valley.

Grgich: Yes. I had many offers in other places for a wage that would be at least twice as much as here, and I couldn't leave. There was something that kept me here in this valley for thirty-three years. I always thought in my mind that one day I would have my own winery in Napa Valley.

Chateau Montelena, 1972-1977

Teiser: Chateau Montelena, where you went in 1972 was started by two people --

Grgich: Two Los Angeles people, Ernie Hahn and Jim Barrett. Jim Barrett was the lawyer of Mr. Hahn, and Mr. Hahn was a mall builder. At one time he had fourteen of them being built in different states. A very active person. He started with zero, and retired at age sixty with \$252,000,000 when he sold his business. He was always a very honest man.

Teiser: How did they happen to buy Chateau Montelena?

Grgich: They liked wine. Barrett and Hahn had everything but a winery.

Teiser: Before you met them, had they bought only vineyards?

Grgich: No, they came to Calistoga and bought the vineyard and the winery with the idea of making wine--Cabernet; they liked Cabernet.

Teiser: Had it been a winery that was operating before?

Grgich: Commercially, about fifty years before. Mr. [Lee] Paschich made homemade wine in it from 1968 on, but it was a small amount, not commercial; no commercial wine had been produced in it for about fifty years.

I came to work for Chateau Montelena in May 1972. They didn't have tanks, they didn't have a crusher, they didn't have a bottling line; they didn't have anything. He said, "Mike sit down. Here is paper. Design the winery. You have just the walls and nothing in them. You fill them in." We had to crush in September, and I came in about the first of May--three months to crushing. It takes you three months just to design something, not counting how long it takes to build and place equipment. I struggled with how to do it, and I did it; in September I had everything ready to go. I had a crusher, a hopper, tanks, a press, and we started making wine in September '72.

I started with them on a small scale. The first wine is still considered the best Chardonnay ever produced in California--vintage '72. It scored ninety-nine in the last tasting of James Laube a few years ago. I put all my body and soul into it--my own wine. We had the first public tasting in San Diego two years later by members of Physicians Friends of Wine. They compared it with the Batard Montrachet, same vintage, which was \$17.50 a bottle, and ours was \$6.00. It was a blind tasting, and only one-fourth of the tasters preferred the French wine; three-fourths preferred that first Chardonnay I made at Chateau Montelena in '72.

Then the '73 Chardonnay was tasted in the Paris tasting [of 1976] and came in first among the best French and California Chardonnays.

Teiser: You have made several notable wines, haven't you, that received a great deal of acclaim. Weren't there some before that?

Grgich: Well, the most amazing one was that Robert Mondavi Cabernet '69; that was a big jump for me.

Teiser: That put him on the map, didn't it?



Grgich: It put him, and it put me and my soul and my pride, and my belief in myself that we could do it. The second one was the '72 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay, then there was the '73 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay. Since then every year there has been something special. When I opened Grgich Hills [Cellar] in 1977, my first Chardonnay was tasted in Chicago with 221 Chardonnays from all around the world and came in first place in the Chicago shoot-out. One wine writer, Craig Goodwin, wrote an article, "The best Chardonnay in the world." I was so happy I couldn't believe it. Little Mike Grgich, born in the village of Desne [laughs]--is that possible? I never believed that I could reach that kind of achievement, being small, five feet six, the eleventh in the family. I came here to America and had no close relatives in the Napa Valley. Then my name shows up in Paris tastings, in Chicago shootouts, as they call them. My wine was taken to France by President Reagan when he made friendship with President Mitterrand. Four cases of the '69 Chardonnay were used for the dinner with Mr. Mitterrand.

Our Chardonnay has also been served to Queen Elizabeth and the King of Spain. I don't believe that I deserve it, and I don't believe that I have made the best Chardonnay in the world, but it doesn't hurt me to feel that I have contributed something good with my life. However, I have to admit that while my father advised me to spread my life over good food, wine, women, and music, I was good only in the winemaking and not in the other areas. I concentrated all my efforts in the wine, and that's why I didn't come through with the food, women, and music. You cannot do everything best.

Teiser: What has happened to Chateau Montelena?

Grgich: They are doing well. Actually, I can tell you a little story about Chateau Montelena. The owners were thinking about making Cabernet wine only, but they told me to make a budget for the next five years. I worked two months to get those expenses projected, and when it came to the income, I put a big zero. Because if I make Cabernet, it takes a minimum of five years before I can put it on the market, so it would be five years of expenditure and no income, no cash flow. They looked at that and said, "Mike, it doesn't look to us very realistic." I said, "It doesn't look that way to me, either." They said, "What can we do?" I said, "Start with your white wines, which you can make and sell and have cash flow until your Cabernet comes into the market."

So we started with Johannisberg Riesling and Chardonnay. Suddenly the Johannisberg Riesling was judged to be the best, and the Chardonnay was judged to be best. Before they came into Cabernet they were so well known for Chardonnay that they had

trouble when the Cabernet came to market. Few people wanted to buy Cabernet, because everybody knew Chateau Montelena for Chardonnay. They had to start discounting the Cabernet, just to keep it moving out. Though they made good Cabernet, the public didn't see Chateau Montelena as a Cabernet winery. The same thing happened to me when I started Grgich Hills. I started on a shoestring with white wines.

After five years as a limited partner at Chateau Montelena, and after the Paris tasting when my Chardonnay came in first place, in my soul came back the original feeling of why I came to America. Did I come to America to work for somebody else, or did I come to America to work for myself? I decided to go on my own. All the savings I had I put into buying twenty acres of land in Rutherford. Bare land--no vineyard, no winery. But at that time I was considering a partnership with Austin Hills, and in conversation with him I learned that he had money and a vineyard, the two things I didn't have. So we became partners and formed Grgich Hills.

The 1976 Paris Tasting

Teiser: You talked about the 1976 Paris wine tasting--

Grgich: The Paris tasting is an event that will remain in the history of American winemaking--where we grew up, as the event when American wines scored better than French. The tasting was organized by English wine man Steven Spurier. Nine French wine judges blindly tasted five French and five California Chardonnays. They would smell it and say [pantomiming], "That's French; that's California; that's French." Then they concentrated on the French, and my Chardonnay was in that French group and came in first place. It was such a big surprise for them that they missed the California wine and didn't separate it from the French.

When Time magazine called me from Europe and wanted to interview me and take my picture, I didn't know why, because I was not aware that my wine was in Paris. I told them, "Be sure it's me and not somebody else." [laughs] I knew I had a good wine, but I didn't know anything about the Paris tasting and what happened there. I got a wire from my manager, Jim Barrett, but I couldn't understand what he was talking about. But when they came from Europe they told me, and I saw the news on t.v. I finally jumped into the news with that event, and since then I have been in the news all the time.



Teiser: Let's start with Grgich Hills tomorrow. You have now had fifteen years experience there.

Grgich: We can cover it in fifteen minutes.

Teiser: No, I think we should have it in some detail.

Grgich: My English is poor, and I don't know whether you will be able to understand everything I have said. I have spent most of my time with wine and not with people, so I have little speaking experience. I can talk better with wine than with people; it doesn't talk back.



GRGICH HILLS CELLAR, 1977 TO DATE

[Interview 2: March 4, 1991]##

Making a Beginning

Teiser: Would you tell a little about Austin Hills?

Grgich: He is a well-educated person. He graduated from business college and has been in the coffee business for many, many years as a part of Hills Brothers Coffee Company. I think they sold the coffee company in 1976. He has been involved with Napa properties since before I met him. He even had made some wine; Souverain Cellars made some wine for him which he sold under Hills Vineyard label.

So when we met he already had a vineyard, had a house in Rutherford, and was pretty much a part of Napa Valley.

Teiser: What kind of a vineyard did he have?

Grgich: His vineyard in Rutherford was Cabernet, Sauvignon blanc, Chardonnay, Merlot--all these fine varieties. He had another vineyard in Napa where he had Sauvignon blanc, Chardonnay, and Johannisberg Riesling--all fine varieties. When the two of us met, I had already heard about his being involved in Napa Valley vineyards and in the winery.

He came to me to ask me to be his winemaker. I felt that I had worked enough for somebody else and should go on my own. We started to talk about it, and we both realized that it would be to the benefit of both of us if we put in what we had and went together rather than go separately. So we formed a corporation and became partners. Grgich Hills Cellar was formed in 1977, and we broke ground on the Fourth of July; that's the celebration that you saw last night.



Breaking ground for Grgich Hills Cellar, 1977. Austin Hills, left, Miljenko Grgich, right.



Teiser: Yes, in the videotape you showed, the celebration in the vineyard.

Grgich: Every year we celebrate the birthday of our winery on the Fourth of July. One portion of the celebration is for the birthday of the winery, and the second celebration is part of my commitment to be a good American.

Teiser: Are you a citizen?

Grgich: Yes. I've been a citizen for twenty-eight years. But at the same time that I am a good American, I'm also a good Croatian, because I lived for thirty years in Croatia, from which I came. Whatever I had in my body came from over there, and I feel responsible for that country, too. So I'm loyal to both of these countries.

On the Fourth of July we broke ground for the building. Nothing was there, as I mentioned before; we had purchased twenty acres of bare land there. We built the winery the same year and started to crush that same year. On the seventh of September [1977] we started to crush. We didn't have a roof, but we had tanks and crushing equipment.

Teiser: Had you bought the equipment?

Grgich: Yes. Some equipment we bought somewhere, and some of it we designed; we designed and made all of the tanks. Many things we purchased, like a hopper, a press, and a pump for the pomace.

Teiser: What did you design yourselves?

Grgich: Stainless steel tanks, mainly, and we purchased some barrels. But we were ready in almost two months. We were really under pressure. As I said, we didn't have a roof, and when rain came we put a plastic sheet on top of the building. But we had the crushing equipment and tanks to accept the wine and start fermentation. The first Chardonnay we made there was proclaimed three years later at "the Chicago shootout" tasting to be the best Chardonnay in the world.

Teiser: And that was the first wine you made there?

Grgich: Yes.

Teiser: What kind of crusher were you using?

Grgich: We have a Healdsburg crusher, which can crush about ten tons per hour. It's a well-designed crusher; still nobody beats them. They have been in the business for probably a hundred years, so



their equipment definitely has a reputation for consistency and quality.

Together we started the new baby, and my dream and also Mr. Hills' dream came true. To have my own little place--that's why I came to America. I didn't come here to work for somebody else; I could have worked for the government in Croatia. I wanted to be on my own and be able to learn what I want and to create what I want. I felt a little artistic blood in my veins, so I wanted to do it my own way.

Teiser: How much did you crush the first year?

Grgich: About two hundred tons.

Teiser: How much did you crush last year?

Grgich: A thousand tons.

Teiser: Still not huge.

Grgich: We think we will crush less this year. Last year we planned to crush between eight and nine hundred tons, but the crop was so good last year that we had to pick it while it was there. But we will crush less this year.

Teiser: In your first year, did you use only Mr. Hills' grapes, or did you buy some?

Grgich: We used some of his grapes, and we bought some.

Teiser: How has that worked out over the years? How much do you buy and how much do you grow?

Grgich: In the beginning, only Mr. Hills had his own two vineyards. Grgich Hills didn't have any, but now Grgich Hills has two hundred acres of vineyards not including Mr. Hills' vineyards. So we feel now that we have enough grapes to satisfy our need, except we usually buy Zinfandel from someone else.

Teiser: What kind of grapes do you grow?

Grgich: We grow Cabernet, Chardonnay, and Sauvignon blanc. We buy Zinfandel.

Teiser: I like your Zinfandel.

Grgich: Oh, yes, we always have had a good Zinfandel. We are known for consistency. Many people come out with an exceptional wine one

year, and the next year the quality goes down. Because we buy, we have a choice of where to buy. If you have your own vineyard, some years it may be good and some not. If the person who sold me grapes last year doesn't have good grapes this year, I don't have to buy them next year. So having the opportunity to buy grapes is not all negative. In some ways it's positive and in some ways negative.

I believe that from now on we will mostly have our own grapes except for Zinfandel. Zinfandel is very particular. We would probably have to buy a special vineyard in the hills, because if Zinfandel is on flat ground the quality is not there--unless it is a sixty or seventy year old vineyard, the quality is just not there; it doesn't have character. We probably won't be able to buy a hillside Zinfandel vineyard or a hillside on which to plant Zinfandel. At the present time we can still find the grapes to buy. The winemaker makes a big difference. People say grapes, grapes, grapes, but anybody can make vinegar out of the best grapes. It takes a good winemaker to make a good wine.

Ideals and Implementation

Teiser: You have a philosophy of winemaking that I want to ask you to discuss.

Grgich: That's the basis on which I've established Grgich Hills. My philosophy is to have the best grapes possible and then the best cooperage possible. We buy French barrels mostly, which are \$550 each empty; if they were full of wine, I wouldn't mind. It comes down to quality--in the grapes, in the cooperage, in the people. I try to get the best in all of these. At the same time, I need to have a good winery building which is air-conditioned so that my wine can mature normally, without the temperature jumping up and down. We just completed our warehouse, in which we store our bottled wines. Everything is temperature controlled and organized now. I can walk through and take inventory of bottled wine in a few hours.

Many wineries just make the wine, and then somebody stores the wine for them and somebody else sells it for them. We do all these things ourselves. We produce the grapes, we produce the wine, we store it at the winery, and we sell it ourselves.

Teiser: You don't go through distributors?

Grgich: We have to go through distributors outside of California, but in California, where we sell 60 percent of our product, we can go directly to the store or restaurant, and that's what we do.

Teiser: That comes from having a good reputation, doesn't it?

Grgich: Yes. The first thing is quality. Once you have it in the bottle, many [winery] people pay attention to what label they are going to put on the bottle, what packaging they are going to put it in, and what kind of chandeliers they are going to buy for their winery. But they lose the main point; they look at the superficialities and not the essence. I look for the grapes, the cooperage, and the best people.

Teiser: What French cooperage do you use?

Grgich: For Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, Limousin oak; for reds, I use some Nevers and some American oak for complexity.

In order to organize my winemaking into a certain style, I have divided my production in about five different stages. The first stage is the grape growing. That's very important; nobody can underestimate the value of the grapes. But grapes are not just a product of soil or climate or people, but of all of these. In other words, it's got to be good soil, a good climate, and good management. Many people sell wine on the soil, soil, soil; but in the best soil, if you don't have good management you are not going to get good grapes. All these things are important. That's the first stage of the wine.

The second stage is fermentation--how you do it: at which temperature, do you macerate white wine before pressing, do you go through malolactic fermentation? All these things that affect fermentation are very important. We do not macerate, and we do not go through malolactic fermentation in white wines. We do not centrifuge, we do not filter grape juice. Our philosophy is to keep in the wine whatever comes from the grapes, like everything is in whole-wheat bread. Our wines do have body, and because of the body they have longevity. Wine has longevity if it has something in it to hold it from breaking down. I keep everything that comes from the grapes in my wines.

Teiser: Do you rack a great deal?

Grgich: I do rack, but it doesn't remove anything; it's just a natural moving of sediment out of wine. We don't beat the wine. So there is a difference in my winemaking and that of some other winemakers who try to do everything with the wine. I try not to do anything, as long as I get good grapes at the right level of maturity. Then

I keep everything that comes with them in the wine and don't remove it, except sediment. Many people nowadays go through maceration, which means that when they crush white grapes they keep them in contact with the skin for a certain length of time--four, six, twelve hours--and then they press them. I press them immediately. Some people centrifuge, but I don't. Some of them filter grape juice, but I don't. Some of them go through malolactic fermentation [with white wines], but I don't, because acid in California Chardonnay, for instance, is just about what it should be when you drink it.

Teiser: At what Brix do you harvest the Chardonnay?

Grgich: About twenty-three. When you go through malolactic fermentation, your acid drops down and you have to correct it--add acid to it. I don't like to take anything from my wine or add anything to it. This is my philosophy. I'm an old-timer, and I'm very much in touch with Mother Nature. I like to keep everything natural.

One day while I was working at Robert Mondavi, [James E.] Nichelini, a winemaker who used to have a small winery next to Lake Berryessa, brought his Zinfandel '67 to taste with Robert Mondavi's '67, which I made. I tasted his Zinfandel, and I liked it even more. I was wondering why I liked his Zinfandel more than I liked mine. I had roto tanks there, stainless steel tanks, filters, centrifuges, French cooperage--all these things--and yet I liked his Zinfandel better. Something new came to my mind: if I can make wine that people like, it seems to me that that is all that counts. So how can I make wine that people like? I came to the conclusion that this guy didn't have any equipment, so he didn't process his wine. It might be that people liked his wine--at least I liked his wine--because it had everything in it; it was a whole wine.

When I was at Chateau Montelena, I started practicing that natural way, because then I could do on my own what I wanted. The wine was accepted in the market like a flash. I couldn't believe it. It's still my philosophy--to try to not process wine but rather to have good grapes, pick them at the right time, and then process them as little as possible. In other words, I want to retain in the wine all the goodness that comes from Mother Nature in the grapes.

Teiser: Do you do anything special about bottling that others don't do?

Grgich: Our bottling doesn't make our wine. Our wine is ready when it goes into the bottle. Bottling is mainly to sterile filter wines so that later on they will not get bacterial contamination, to make sure the wine is clean, and that the bottles are properly

filled, as the government requires--750 cc. We have to make sure we have good corks, good foil, and a decent label. I have a deluxe bottling line. But when we make wine, we try to keep the wine whole, so bottling does not change our wine in any way.

The third stage of our winemaking is when we put wine in the barrels for aging, where the wine starts breathing through the pores of the oak and starts growing--qualitywise, not volumewise. The wines start looking better, smelling better, and tasting better. We keep them in the oak until the wine harmonizes with the oakiness, because while the wines are in the barrels oak extractives are leaching into the wine and enriching the wine with oakiness, which you can smell and you can taste. It's very important that you don't have too much oak or not enough oak. If we balance fruitiness from the grape and oakiness from the oak, then later on, in a year or two or three, those two marry and fuse into a bouquet. I sometimes joke that I am marrying the wines. That is an expression in my language; you marry the oak and the fruit into a bouquet. The bouquet is what my wines are known for. The aroma comes from the grapes and the oakiness from the oak, but the marriage of these two is called the bouquet.

Teiser: Is it the timing that is delicate about that?

Grgich: Everything is important, and mainly it is that the winemaker follow the wine and know how to do the right things at the right time--not just the right things at the wrong time. [laughs] It's very important that you follow your wines all the way through like a baby. I many times compare wine with babies, because they need care. You cannot make fine wine by the book or by any projection that you can make to compute how to make wine. Twenty-five years ago, when I was at Davis studying a certain aspect of enology, one professor mentioned that they now have computers, and the computer would be able to make perfect wines. At that time I thought, "My goodness, why am I spending money for an education if I won't be needed?" Now, after twenty-five years, they need me more than ever, because the computer only does what you put in it. The computer has no eyes or nose. God gave us five senses, and we have to use all five when we are making wine. The computer has no senses, so my nose, my tongue, and my eyes are still very necessary to make fine wine.

Teiser: One of the factors in fine winemaking is for the winemaker to be able to tell, when the wine is new, about what it is going to be when it is aged. Can you project that?

Grgich: Oh, yes. That's very important. I have been making wine only in America for thirty-three years, and then I have to add thirty years from the old country. So at the present time I am the

oldest working winemaker in the Napa Valley with the exception of André Tchelistcheff. It's not only that I have worked for so long, but I have been exposed to three of the best winemakers that I know of. That's Lee Stewart, André Tchelistcheff, and Robert Mondavi. I don't make wine like Robert Mondavi or like André Tchelistcheff or like Lee Stewart, but they have given me the triple information from which I can make decisions. Decisions have to be made today that nobody made before; decisions I make today I never made before. But the more experiences I've had and the more I can remember--the computer in my head--the better decisions I can make.

Teiser: Experience and memory?

Grgich: Yes, they are very important--and care.

"One Cannot Mention Care Too Often"

Grgich: If you don't take care of your body and your mind in your work habits, you will fail. One cannot mention care too often. It seems to me that modern America is paying too much attention to computers, mechanization, and organization; and yet I don't hear enough about care. That care is necessary, because you have to observe wine every day. A computer will not do that for you; you have to do it yourself. You have to know exactly, to have in your hands strings from wine that you have in the winery. You have to know at which stage they are and what they need; do the right things at the right time. And do everything as simply as possible.

Simplicity is part of my philosophy. Don't complicate. Once you start complicating, you will make a mistake somewhere. Make it simple, because you don't make wine yourself; you have people to make wine with you. If those people cannot understand what you want to tell them, they will make it their own way. So you try to judge their judgment and their ability to produce and adjust your orders to their ability to do it. Many people forget that; they just write orders on a piece of paper, whether people know what they are talking about or not. I have learned about care from being in quality control at Robert Mondavi and Beaulieu Vineyard. When I go and open the bung and see the wine, I will know what was going on there.

Teiser: You can tell by sight?

Grgich: Yes.

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Teiser: Do you smell it at the same time?

Grgich: If looking isn't enough, I kneel down and smell it. I take a sample to the laboratory and analyze it under the microscope. So I make a total examination of the wine, by the eyes, the nose, and I listen; I put my ear on the bung hole. If there is any process going on, there will be some bubbling. If there is some bubbling, I know something is going on, and I have to find out what it is and see to it that I stop it, because I don't want anything to go on that I don't want. You use your eyes, your nose, and your ears, and these are all part of the care.

Teiser: Did Robert Mondavi have everything checked every day?

Grgich: Yes. I established his quality control; I was his first quality control person. I gave that position to Zelma Long when I went to Chateau Montelena. It wasn't necessarily every day, but you know approximately when you have to change your baby, and you go over and see if it was needed. Sometimes I would go home and get up at three o'clock in the morning; I knew something was happening in some particular process, and I had to go and see if it was under control or not.

Teiser: Was that commonly done here at that time?

Grgich: Every winery tries to do it, but very few do it as consistently as we did at Beaulieu Vineyard, Robert Mondavi, and Chateau Montelena. Whatever else I was, quality control was my first priority.

Another thing is that I, as one person, oversee everything, so there are no messages being missed between shifts. I am trying to keep the winery at such a size that I can keep it under control. I know exactly what is going on in the vineyard, in the winery, and in the marketing, because I am the main promoter of our wine, too. Many times people spend lots of time quarreling about who is first--the sales department, the production department, or the vineyard. In mine, I have to make judgments according to particular times.

Sometimes the vineyard is the most important, sometimes production is the most important, and sometimes sales and marketing is the most important. I can then put accent and action where it is necessary. If you have three departments, the vineyard department always wants to be first, the production

department always wants to be first, and the sales/marketing department wants to be first.

In many wineries the sales are first. Sales says, "I can sell that, and don't make what I cannot sell." In my place, I make what I can make the best and then sales has to sell it. We are on totally different sides. I don't make what the sales department thinks it can sell; I make what I think I can make the best, and then it is up to them to find a way to sell it. I help them, because I am the supervisor in all the departments. I know what can be done and what cannot be done. It's a benefit that there is one man who understands the vineyard, the wines, and the sales. There are very few in the business who can manage all those things.

Teiser: Only a small winery --

Grgich: There are many small wineries--for instance, whoever buys a winery, first he doesn't know how to manage vineyards, he doesn't know how to make wine, and he doesn't know how to sell. He knows a little bit about everything but doesn't have the experience to manage all these things. I graduated from business college before enology, and that has helped me greatly in my business judgment. I know bookkeeping, accounting, budgeting, and all these things. I cannot do everything myself, but I can oversee it and manage it. I believe in an operation that is well managed so that quality and efficiency come through.

Teiser: Does Mr. Hills do any of the business management?

Grgich: Oh, he works with me. He knows what's going on, but I am mainly responsible for the vineyards, winemaking, and the sales. He helps here and there. We are good partners. It's better that he's not involved in one of these departments, because then the partners argue about who has priority. This way, I am in charge of everything, and he helps. That way we can have one style. That's how I created the Grgich Hills style. When people buy Grgich Hills wine they know they are buying a certain quality that has been established for fifteen years. There are very few wineries that have style, because many wineries hire the winemaker. He is there for several years, like a quarterback, and if he is good, somebody will steal him, like they would a chef. Then a new winemaker comes in and produces a totally different style, and then another comes in. In my place, I'm the only one for fifteen years. That is why I have a style of wine. Every year we try to improve the wine, but yet the original style is carried on from vintage to vintage.

Winery Personnel

Teiser: Do you have anyone working with you in marketing, in selling?

Grgich: I have about twenty-five people working at the winery. I have a good crew in the vineyard, a good crew in the cellar, and a good crew in sales. My daughter, Violet, who is twenty-seven years old, is now involved in promotion and sales. I also have a nephew, Ivo Jeramaz. His name is very funny. It sounds like a Turkish name, but he is not Turkish; he is Croatian. He graduated in mechanical engineering from the University of Zagreb. After that he came to me, and he is very helpful in the designing of pumps or whatever is involved with engineering. At the same time, he loves winemaking, and he is good at figures. You cannot be a good engineer unless you know figures, so he knows figures. Whenever we have trouble with the figures, he is there. I hope he will stay with us forever in production. My daughter is supposed to take my place in management and sales. So I have at least those two people who are my blood relatives.

We have other people who are very important to us, like Gustavo Brambila, who has been with us for fifteen years. I hired him at Chateau Montelena, and when I came down here he came with me; he was my first employee. He is still here, and is still my major man. He was there when we built the winery and established our style. He is very valuable to us.

Gary Ecklin has been with us for eleven years. He is an enologist, as is Brambila, so there are two enologists besides me; there are three of us enologists in a managerial position. And I have three more enologists in the cellars. Actually, whoever touches my wine has a degree in enology. They come here because they know they will learn how to make fine wines. One day they will go on their own, but I don't mind. I would rather have people here who know what they are doing and who one day I might be proud of than to have just ordinary workers. There is probably no other winery in the world with so many qualified people. My philosophy is to have the best grapes, the best cooperage, and the best people.

Teiser: Are your enologists Davis graduates?

Grgich: Brambila is a Davis graduate, as is Ecklin, and I have three more Davis graduates who work in the cellar.

Teiser: It must be great experience for them.

Grgich: I hope so. I tell them that they should learn something everyday. Don't stay behind; you should grow and become somebody. You have one life; make some good sense out of it. If they get anything from me, they will be good winemakers. You have to rub off on somebody in your life to give you incentive to keep going.

Teiser: You really have taught a good number of people who have added to the wine industry here, haven't you?

Grgich: Yes. I think I am most proud of Zelma Long, whom I hired when I was working at Robert Mondavi. She is very well known now all around the world as one of the best winemakers in the United States and maybe in the world.

Teiser: Are there others?

Grgich: Oh, yes. There is Aaron Mosley, who is winemaker for De Moor [Winery], Fred Payne, Mark Smith, and Bo Barrett, who is now winemaker at Chateau Montelena. These people are really doing fine. Each of them is on their own as a winemaker. I think each of them has gotten something from me. However, they developed their own style.

Business Goals and Methods

Grgich: My business is mainly formed on my philosophy. I never was inclined to overspend, but rather to spend what is most necessary. Many people go into business thinking that business is to spend money. In my philosophy, business is to make money, period. That's one goal of business. Second goal is to produce quality to be proud of. Many people go into business on the basis of religion or something else, like the Christian Brothers. You cannot run a business by church rules; that's why they had to be sold to Heublein. Neither can you run a church by business rules. Business has its own rules, and the church has its own rules; business is run best by business rules, and the church is run best by church rules.

I have always tried to avoid "Let George do it." George will not do it like you want it done; he will do it like he wants to do it. So I was working like crazy because I didn't let somebody else do the most important things; I did them myself. It's very hard for me to give the very important things to somebody else to do. If I can't supervise it, at least I want to be there. I have learned by talking with people that there is always a missing link. You tell something to one person, that person tells

another, and at the end it is totally changed. If I have a message for somebody, I tell it directly to that person. If my worker has to do a very important job, I don't go and tell my foreman to tell the worker. I go to the foreman and the worker, and I ask both of them if they understand what I want them to do.

I believe in a small operation with direct contact, because I have learned that in California, especially in Napa Valley, we have good grapes and could produce good wine almost every year. If one doesn't produce good wine, somebody has made a mistake.

When I was a student in Zagreb, there was a new wave of preventive medicine: prevent sickness; don't cure it. I have learned the value of prevention so that in the wine industry I am trying to prevent problems, not to cure them. I teach my people not only how to do it but how to prevent problems. If we start with good grapes and don't make any mistakes, we'll end up definitely with a fine wine.

These are all things that I consider a part of my success. The philosophy that I have put forward is quality oriented and at the same time business oriented.

Teiser: You've made wine the way you thought it should be and were successful. How do consumers learn about it? Most people don't have as good a palate as yours; they can't tell your Zinfandel from somebody else's. How has this happened?

Grgich: We have settled lately on the assumption that, like each of us has different fingerprints, we have different palates. Still, fingers are fingers, and palates are palates. We have a tasting room, and I expose my wine to the public and watch what they are saying and thinking and how they like the wine. I don't make wine for myself; I make wine for the public. As people are learning about good wine, I'm learning about their palates, too. So we both meet somewhere there.

Teiser: Do you spend much time in the tasting room?

Grgich: No, but I try every day to be an hour there. I listen to the people, and I tell them what I told you about palates being different. What you like, that is the wine you should drink. You shouldn't drink Cabernet because Professor [Maynard] Amerine tells you it's the best wine in the world, and you shouldn't drink Chardonnay because Mike Grgich says it's the best wine in the world. You taste, and the wine that you like is your wine. If it happens that it's a cheap wine, good for you; you enjoy it and pay little money. Punished are those who like more expensive wine; they get what they like, but they have to pay lots of money.

There is a distinction between a fine wine or a good wine and bad wine. Yet there is the distinction between the good wine you like and the good wine you don't like. I am trying to make good wine that most people might like. I know how to make good wine, but at the same time, in my judgment it's very important that people like it. I take that into account, and many people don't. Many people taste the wines and say, "It's a good wine." I say there is a little more to it.

And there is a little more to taste; it's after taste. After you taste the wine, how do you feel? Does the wine make you happy, or do you wish you hadn't drunk a glass, or do you want another glass? So much of this plays a role in the enjoyment of wine and therefore in the buying of wine. If people like a wine, they will buy it again; if people don't like it, they will look somewhere else and find a wine they like.

I have to learn what people like. I bend my personal opinion many times because of people's likes.

Teiser: When your wines win awards at competitions, do people tend to buy more of those?

Grgich: Yes. Some people buy what somebody tells them to, and some people buy what they like. So you have many different customers. One buys because he likes the wine, another buys because it has a gold medal, another buys because of my accent. Some buy because of label. There are so many individuals, and people buy for different reasons. Many people buy my wine because of consistency. If people know our wines, they know our wines are consistently good. For instance, we have started to release the new vintage in the market. Most stores and restaurants require a sample so that they can see what your vintage is and whether they want to buy it or not. Not from Grgich Hills--people just order a new vintage after the previous vintage is sold out. So you see how much I save just on not sending out samples.

I save a lot by selling wine at the winery. We sell at least 10 percent directly at the winery.

Pre-Release Club

Teiser: The videotape you showed me yesterday of that wonderful party--was it mainly your tasting club--

Grgich: We have a pre-release club.

Teiser: Do you sell much through that?

Grgich: Yes. Probably we sell 5 percent through that. They are very important people; they are not just anybody who buys a bottle of wine. They are all wine connoisseurs who are very influential people. We started that club at the time when I pressed two hundred tons, and my release would be sold out in one month. So the friends who liked my style of wine were complaining that they couldn't find any. They forced me to start the club, through which they would buy wine before it went on the market. A letter is sent to them at least twice a year, and a case of each wine is offered. Let's say that in summer we release Chardonnay and Cabernet, so we send them the letter in June. Then we have the Fourth of July for them to come here and taste the wine. If they like the wine, they can buy it; if they don't like it, they don't have to buy it. So they can buy the wine between June and September, and in September it goes on the market. They can buy it before anybody else.

We started that twelve years ago when our wine wasn't available, but people are still continuing to buy through that club. They treat their friends with our wines that cannot be bought on the market because they were the first [to buy it]; they are the cream of the customers. It's very beneficial to us, because before the wine comes to the market somebody already knows Grgich Hills Cabernet '86: "Is it in the stores?" "No, you have to wait until it comes on the market." It's a kind of promotional tool, and at the same time we have those permanent customers who buy from us all the time. Not only do we sell the wine, but we don't have to go around and open new accounts and find new customers.

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Teiser: Do they get discounts?

Grgich: Yes, but the discount is less than the wholesaler gets, so we get more money from them than from the wholesalers.

The first year my accountant called me, and he said, "Mike, do you know how much you have spent for promotion?" I asked how much, and he said, "Twenty-four dollars." [laughter] Once a man was evaluating our business. Every businessman wants to know where he stands compared to other businesses. Our sales costs were one-third the average sales costs in the wine industry. So it's not only that we make good wine, but at the same time, because it is good wine, we can sell it. There are less expenses

once you have a good wine. People don't realize how important that is. People drink only what is in the bottle. They don't drink foil, the bottle, the label; they don't drink the case, whether it's a wood case or a cardboard case. People are still smart. They like to pay for what they use.

One part of my job, as I said, is that I supervise the vineyard and growing of the grapes, and I also supervise production and sales and organize each of these in such a way that we are definitely, I can say, the most successful winery in the Napa Valley. We aren't the biggest one, and we don't want to be the biggest one. But we have prestige.

Teiser: You are tied in remarkably close to your market. I imagine every winery would like to be that way.

Labels and Vineyard Blends

Grgich: The average cost of my wine is probably more expensive than any other wine in California, because many wineries make private reserve and then have regular wines, and they make a second and third labels. Those are all priced differently, and they sell the cheap ones the most. In my place, each wine is it. It's Cabernet 1986. All our Cabernet is the same. There is a master blend, and every bottle is the same and at the same price.

Teiser: You don't make vineyard designations?

Grgich: We blend vineyards for complexity.

Legh Knowles, who was president of Beaulieu Vineyards and the sales manager for a long time, told me once that somebody wanted to hire him to work in the wine industry. He was a trumpet player, and he didn't want to take the job because he didn't know anything about wine. But the guy liked Legh's personality. He said, "Legh, I believe you could sell wine. We need in the wine industry some people with a personality like yours." He said, "I'm afraid." "What are you afraid of?" "If you hire me, next week I'll have to go to a wine tasting. I'll sit at a table, and the person sitting next to me will ask me what I think about the wine. I don't know anything about wine. What can I say?"

He said, "Easy. Can you see the color of the wine? Red wine, white wine; judging the color is part of the competition. Then sniff the wine. Can you do that?" Legh said, "I think I can do that." "Can you sip a little bit in your mouth, gurgle a

little bit, and say, 'Interesting'?" Legh said, "Fifty years ago, if you said, 'interesting,' everybody would think you were a wine connoisseur." So he smiled and took the job. [laughter] But, he says, today, if somebody doesn't know about wine, he still has to know how to judge the color, sniff the wine for the aroma and the bouquet, sip a little wine and gurgle it, and say, "Complex." In fifty years we have moved from 'interesting' to 'complex'. [laughter]

So today we are making complex wines, and that complexity in my Chardonnay comes from blending several different vineyards. I have a vineyard in Rutherford, here in Yountville, in Napa, and in Carneros. I blend them all together, and every time you smell the wine, some of these vineyards come through in different aromas. It's enrichment; that's the new quality--complexity. I do not go by the individual vineyard, because each vineyard fluctuates more than a blend of four vineyards together. Some years one vineyard is better, and some years it is worse than others. That way I get my style--not totally uniform, but very close to my style--by blending the four vineyards every year. If one vineyard is a little worse, the others correct it.

We do not practice vineyard designation because we are looking for simplicity in marketing, too. If you have Grgich Hills Chardonnay from the Yountville vineyard, Grgich Hills Chardonnay from the Napa vineyard, etc., people haven't seen the vineyards, so they don't know which vineyard they are tasting, if they want to compare them and talk about it. If they drink Grgich Hills 1989, there is only one. It's so simple to sell and promote. If you have four different Chardonnays, you have to promote each of them. If I have just one, [snap] it goes through; it is easier to promote.

Simplicity is the basis through my system. We do not complicate it. That's why we don't go into the private reserve, filters or no filters, or other labels. We have one wine of one vintage. People ask me, "Mike, when are you going to make private reserve Cabernet?" I say, "I made it; I just didn't put it on the label." [laughs]

Teiser: I'm interested in your label from a different point of view. Are the labels you use now on your wines the same ones you started with?

Grgich: Yes. Our first label was for Chardonnay, and then we faced coming out with Zinfandel. Sebastian Titus, who made the first label, came to me and said, "Mike, now you need a new label." They want to make money; they want to make labels. I said, "Goodness, a label costs so much money. I don't need a new label." He asked,

"How can you make a red wine out of white grapes?" [laughs] He tried to pursue me to make a new label. I said, "I will tell you pretty soon." What I did was to remove the green and yellow colors [on the Chardonnay label] and got this Cabernet Sauvignon in just black and white. So our white wines have colored labels, and our red wines have black and white labels, but they are all the same for simplicity, again. People get used to that frame; they see that label with those grapes, and they know it is Grgich Hills. If I had different labels, they would be confused. But they know there is just one label for Grgich Hills; they see it, and it's very simple to memorize.

Teiser: It seems to me I saw a bottle of Riesling in the tasting room--

Grgich: Yes, Johannisberg Riesling, late harvest. That label is in the style of the original label of Mr. Hills. It was not Grgich Hills but Hills Vineyards. He registered that label and didn't want it to disappear. In case something happens, he wants to be able to carry on the tradition. We decided we would keep that label on one wine, and it is late harvest Johannisberg Riesling. We have kept that label for fifteen years just to carry on his label tradition. That horse [on it] is his family crest.

Teiser: That was a well-aged wine, I noticed.

Grgich: Yes, it is '85 vintage--six years old. We sell maybe five hundred cases out of fifty thousand cases of that wine. I knew that the label meant a lot to him, so I said okay. We did make two Rieslings before, and by having a regular Riesling with one label and late harvest with the other label, it gives people the distinction between the two Rieslings. They know regular Riesling is one label and late harvest is the other label.

White Riesling

Teiser: At Souverain you had some success with a White Riesling.

Grgich: Very much, yes.

Teiser: Do you still make it the same way?

Grgich: We improved it as we went along. We definitely make better Riesling at Grgich Hills than anywhere before, but I have kept that original Lee Stewart style of Riesling. When I came to Robert Mondavi, I tried to make it in that style. At Beaulieu Vineyard they made a different style of Johannisberg Riesling;



Miljenko Grgich, left, and Austin Hills, right, in the Grgich Hills Cellar, 1990.

they made it dry and aged it in the bottle for two years before releasing it, and it would totally lose its fruitiness. When I came to Robert Mondavi, I started with that fruity style.

The Robert Mondavi '69 Johannisberg Riesling was just grabbed up by people. Robert Mondavi bought all the Riesling grapes from Beaulieu Vineyard that they would sell. That [Robert Mondavi] wine all sold in three months because we had fruity wine and left about 1 percent of residual sugar. Riesling is bitter by nature. If there is no sugar in it, it just is not palatable unless it is well aged. From then on I always made regular Johannisberg Riesling between 1 and 1.5 percent residual sugar, and I started to make late harvest between 6 and 10 percent residual sugar. Two styles.

Riesling is not much in demand these days, so we stopped making regular Johannisberg Riesling in 1987.

Teiser: It's surprising that it has fallen out of favor.

Grgich: I don't know why, but somehow the dry wines are taking over. When people don't know much about wine, beginners start with a semi-sweet wine. As they go forward, they move into the dry wines. My customers for my Chardonnay and my Cabernet have already graduated.

Teiser: You would think there would have been some influence from White Zinfandel, although it's in such a different category.

Grgich: I would say you are right, there was some influence. Some people like wine with a slight amount of sugars. When White Zinfandel appeared on the market, it was half the price of the Johannisberg Riesling, and yet it did have that mellow taste which Johannisberg Riesling used to have. So that probably did cut some ground out from under Johannisberg Riesling.

It's interesting to observe that twenty years ago in America, statistics show that about 20 percent of the wine on the market was rosé. Do you remember grenache rosé? Now there is about 20 percent White Zinfandel on the market but no rosé. So nothing has changed. [laughter] The percentage is the same, but the name has changed.

And now we will switch since this "French paradox." Did you see the "60 Minutes" TV program? Now people are going from whites to reds. They say that red wine sales went up 44 percent since that program was seen on TV. So now there is another reason why people might prefer red wine over white wine--health reasons.

Teiser: It's lucky they took to white wines at a time when people could produce them inexpensively.

Grgich: And better.

More on Improvements in White Wines

Grgich: When I came to Napa Valley, white wines were almost undrinkable. If they were on the shelf for three to six months, they would oxidize or throw sediment. The wines were not palatable. Now we can make white wines very well, and those wines can improve by aging; they can age for ten years at temperatures of fifty to fifty-five degrees. I still have some Chardonnay from '77 which I made and kept a few bottles. If somebody were to ask me which of these old vintages I would like to drink tonight, it would still be the '77 Chardonnay.

Teiser: What accounts for the improvement?

Grgich: We learned how to make better wines, and we learned how to grow better grapes. Those are the major reasons. Since they discovered virus-free vines at Davis, most of the vineyards have been planted with healthier grape vines, and those vineyards are like healthier persons. If you have two people typing and one is sick, the sick one will type slowly [taps slowly], and the healthy one will speed along. So it is with healthy vines. The vineyards have been replanted into better varieties and are virus-free. And the grapes mature earlier, because when they are sick they won't mature easy.

Then we have learned more about wine--how not to process them but rather keep everything in them. The whole wine gives longevity to the wine. And we have learned that wine has to be stored at a cooler temperature, which people didn't care about before. If you put the wine in the sunshine, it would oxidize in a week.

We have learned all these things together, bit by bit, year by year, until now we have produced such fine white wines that are the best in the world or at least equal to the best wines in the world.

Teiser: What other than Chardonnay are the outstanding ones?

Grgich: I don't want to talk about somebody else, because we all have different taste buds, and what is good for one person is not good

for another person. We don't talk about other wines in our tasting room. People ask about other wines, and we say, "We know about other wines, but you go over and taste for yourself. Every winery has a tasting room, and if you like it, that's your wine."

Teiser: When you taste wines to make judgments about whatever processes you use, do you taste your wines against others ever?

Grgich: No. I used to do that at Robert Mondavi. Robert Mondavi always compared his wine with somebody else. We have our style, and I'm only going to compare my style with my new wines so that we stay not in the style of somebody else but in our own style. We compare previous vintages with our new vintages so that we stay in that style. When the customer gets the wine, they know approximately--if they like one vintage, most likely they will like other vintages, because it's the same style.

Financing the Winery

Teiser: Let me get back to the development of Grgich Hills Cellar. You said that you are fiscally conservative. How did you finance increasing or improving your equipment over the years?

Grgich: We have been keeping all profits in the business; we did not take any dividends for probably eight years. With the money we earned, we built the winery and bought equipment and vineyards. We thought that we should not be dependent on any bank. We don't owe a penny to any bank now.

Teiser: Really?

Grgich: Believe me. This is so ridiculous, because many in the wine industry who are worth \$10 million owe \$8 million to the bank. They say one Napa Valley winery owes \$6.7 million to the bank, and they estimate his value at \$7 million. Another winery has been estimated to be worth \$4 million and owes \$3.5 million to the banks. This is not our style. We saved money by using our own money. We did not spend money on interest. Many people are trying to just make interest payments. Interest has been very high these fifteen years, and we stayed away from that. We started small, and what we earned we have been putting back into the business.

Teiser: You haven't even had to borrow to get from season to season?

Grgich: Sometimes. We always had a line of credit. We started to make money the first year. We were organized in such a way that when we started the business we purchased the wines that Austin Hills had made before. On the Fourth of July we broke ground, on the seventh of September we started to crush, and on the first of November we started to sell. As soon as we moved into the next year, we had made a profit.

Teiser: That's very unusual, isn't it?

Grgich: Wineries usually make a profit after five or ten years. But, you see, I am business oriented, and I found my style, which I thought was a safe style. I didn't want to depend upon banks or anybody else. When people ask me, "Have you ever been hit by a passing car when crossing the road?" I say, "Never." They say, "How come?" I say, "When I am crossing the street, there is no car on either side of me." [laughter] I want to be safe when I am crossing the road, and in business I like to be safe.

We went slowly, gradually, but safely. We started with high quality wine. As you know, our first Chardonnay was proclaimed the best in the world. Our wine was so much in demand that that demand was reflected in the price. What you do if you have more demand than you have wine is to raise the price. Our Chardonnay was the most expensive in the United States.

Teiser: I'm trying to think of others who had more demand than they could fill. The McCraes at Stony Hill had more demand than they had wine, and I guess Joe [Joseph E.] Heitz has steady demand. But there aren't many of you.

Grgich: Not many.

Teiser: I don't know what it proves. Careful winemaking?

Grgich: You have to know what you are doing, and you have to be small. If you are big and you fail to make good wine, then that's it. The main thing is to have good wine. Numero uno--I never take that from my mind. That has to stay in my mind--first, quality.

Teiser: Definitions of good change. There are wineries that have been in families, and when the young people take over the wines were changed to their concept of what is good. Maybe part of the key is having one person live forever.

Grgich: I would say so, and I would like that to happen to me. If I could be the first person who could live forever, I would vote for it. [laughter] There is a joke going around in America. They say that the first generation has the attitude to create, the second

generation has the attitude to enjoy, and the third generation cannot even keep it; they destroy it. Then it starts new again. This is not true in every case, but in many cases it is true.

The first generation suffers and learns how to suffer. The next generation doesn't suffer, and they will not suffer. I will suffer if my winery is going to break down: I will push with my shoulders to keep it up. People who didn't suffer cannot do that. They are looking for comfort; their comfort is number one. The idea of the creation in the first generation is replaced in the second generation with comfort. Comfort is the biggest enemy of us now in America. We want to have everything, but you don't have to have everything. But as soon as we can have those credit cards, we charge, charge, charge; the whole country is on credit.

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Teiser: I've been doing an interview with a company (not in the wine industry) where the third generation just decided to sell. They said, "This has been long enough in one family. It will now go downhill."

Grgich: In some cases that's true.

Changes

Teiser: Over the years since 1977, how has your winery changed as it has grown? Or has it changed?

Grgich: Qualitywise, it has improved. Stylewise, we have, as you can see, eliminated Johannisberg Riesling, which was our biggest seller for the first few years; it paid our bills, because you make Johannisberg Riesling, and in six months you can sell it and get your money back--cash flow. We have replaced it with Fumé Blanc, which is dry. We have more demand for Fumé Blanc and get more money for a bottle than we did for Johannisberg Riesling. That's a change as far as a variety is concerned.

Our Cabernet style has changed. When I worked for Beaulieu Vineyard, every bottle of De Latour Private Reserve used to say, "100 Percent Cabernet Sauvignon." I started making Cabernet Sauvignon 100 percent, but then I realized that even at Beaulieu Vineyard, who had on their label "100 percent," Mr. De Latour planted Merlot in the vineyard, and I wouldn't like to write down "100 percent." I found out, when I built a winery next to his

vineyard, that he had about 5 percent of Merlot interplanted with Cabernet. Nobody in the winery knew about it.

I started working a little bit with Merlot and a little bit with Cabernet franc, so my two vintages of Cabernet---Cabernet '80 and Cabernet '81--were 100 percent Cabernet Sauvignon. In 1982 we started to use some Merlot and Cabernet franc, not much, but it creates complexity; I told you it was interesting to make complex [flavors?]. We added Merlot for smoothness and Cabernet franc for fruitiness, and Cabernet Sauvignon has that style, that stillness, that body, that strength. So we have a complex Cabernet.

Teiser: How about Zinfandel?

Grgich: It has stayed the same. Fumé Blanc we have changed, because when drought years started to appear five years ago, we noticed that the leaves in the vineyard fell off and the grapes were exposed to the sun. We were afraid that we wouldn't be able to make good wine, because the green berries became golden berries when exposed to the sun. But once we made the wine, we found out that the wine did not suffer from that excessive herbaceousness. Before, the green grapes were grassy, and the yellow grapes were not so grassy. Yet we have discovered that if clusters are exposed to the sun during summer, we will not have that aggressive herbaceousness, which was objected to in Fumé Blanc or Sauvignon Blanc. Now we strip the leaves ourselves in the summer to open the grapes to the sun, and the sun turns the green color of the berries into yellow. So we have improved that wine.

We are still at about the same complexity in Chardonnay, using grapes from different vineyards in one total blend, and we don't go through malolactic fermentation. However, we are trying to keep some yeast in the wine. Yeast autolyzes and enriches the wine during barrel aging. We have some yeasts now in our Chardonnay, which we rack to the barrels at the beginning with a filter. We used to filter the Chardonnay on its way to the barrels, and then the yeast would remain in the filter. Now we rack so that a little bit of the yeast comes through with the wine. That yeast dies and autolyzes and enriches the body of the wine.

Teiser: Did you experiment, or did you know what kind of yeast you wanted to use?

Grgich: We have stuck with one yeast all this time--French White, which I was using at Beaulieu Vineyard. We made experiments one year with André Tchelistcheff, checking about twelve different kinds of

yeast, and we settled on the French White. I used that yeast at Robert Mondavi, at Chateau Montelena, and at Grgich Hills. So mainly we use French White, which was developed by the Pasteur Institute in France.

Teiser: Did you ever experiment with wild yeasts?

Grgich: I didn't. I made all my wines in the old country with wild yeast, but it wasn't any better than what we use now. There are many things that some people are using just to say, "I am different." I'm trying to be good, and I use whatever is necessary to be good. I don't sell my wines because I use a lot of things, like centrifuges or filters; I sell my wine because they taste good and people like them. I like to say that I make my wine rounded like a bowl; nothing stands out but the pleasure. That's my goal.

Grgich Hill Vineyards

Teiser: Let me ask you about your vineyards. What vineyards do you own?

Grgich: We own twenty acres in Rutherford, where the winery is. We own this vineyard here in Yountville, which is about seventy acres. There are eighty acres of land but about seventy acres of vineyard, where all our Cabernet comes from.

Teiser: When was that bought?

Grgich: We bought it in 1984, together with this house as a bonus.

Teiser: You told me when this house was built.

Grgich: Yes, in 1885.

Teiser: What other vineyards have you?

Grgich: We purchased last year a hundred acres in Carneros. So we have, roughly speaking, about two hundred acres. We do have part of the Olive Hills vineyard--about 10 percent; Austin Hills is general partner of Olive Hills Vineyard.

Teiser: Where are his vineyards?

Grgich: His vineyards are in Rutherford, about a mile from our vineyard, and in Napa.

Teiser: That gives you a lot of geographical spread within a small area.



Violet Grgich and Miljenko Grgich in the
vineyard adjacent to the winery, 1990.

Photograph by Earl Roberge

Grgich: Yes, and it gives us complexity. I would say that Cabernet is good in St. Helena, Rutherford, and Yountville, but not down below. We have a vineyard here that is very close to Heitz' Martha's Vineyard, and on the other side is Dominus, two of the best-known vineyards in the Napa Valley. Our Cabernet vineyard is squeezed in between them.

As far as Chardonnay wine is concerned, we get body from Rutherford and Yountville, and we get fruitiness from Carneros. So we have complex wines. We are very lucky. In fifteen years we have developed a winery from which, if I could live forever, I would make a profit every year, because every year I am going to make better wines.

Teiser: Have you had any trouble with phylloxera yet?

Grgich: Not yet.

Teiser: Aren't you lucky!

Grgich: Lucky. And we know something about phylloxera. After the second world war I planted straight, without rootstock, when I was in the old country.

Teiser: Without grafting onto resistant rootstock?

Grgich: Yes. After six or seven years, phylloxera started to eat them up, so I am familiar with that. I don't have any yet, and we are not pulling any vineyards out before we know there is damage. Who knows, one day that louse might disappear. We might find a natural enemy to eat them up. With Mother Nature, everything is possible. So I'm not going to pull out my vineyards, like some people are doing. They say, "Within ten years I have to replant all my vineyards, and I have a thousand acres of vineyards. So this year I will pull out a hundred acres." A good producing vineyard--I don't do things like that. But because they have a big vineyard, they have to do it; they can't replant a thousand acres in one year. Being small gives me the opportunity to watch and not do any foolish things. I can maneuver easier, being small.

Teiser: Besides, they may find an ever-resistant rootstock.

Grgich: You never know. One of these days--Mother Nature changes; bugs mutate, and bugs have enemies. For instance, we used to spray once or twice every year for leaf hoppers, and then we learned that everything in nature has an enemy. There are leaf hoppers that eat leaf hoppers; they are different in size, and they look

different. If the good leaf hoppers have enough food, they propagate like hell and eat up all the bad leaf hoppers.

Teiser: Did you have to introduce them?

Grgich: No, they were just there; Mother Nature had them. We have leaf hoppers every year, but as there are leaf hoppers that do the damage, there are also leaf hoppers that eat leaf hoppers. As long as these good ones eat the others, and the bad ones don't do big damage, we let them remain. Because then the good ones will propagate when they have food; they only propagate if they have something to eat. In two or three years leaf hoppers won't be any problem. Then they will start to build up and build up, because the good ones won't have enough food and will die. It's a balance of Mother Nature.

Who knows, one day there might be something that will eat that phylloxera louse, and we won't have to pull out the vineyards. As long as the vineyards are producing good grapes and enough so that it is economically feasible, I'm not going to pull them out.

CHANGES IN THE CALIFORNIA WINE INDUSTRY SINCE 1958

Teiser: I'd like to ask about changes since 1958 in the California wine industry.

Grgich: I would say that as far as white wines are concerned, since then more attention has been paid to the grape juice to be as clean as possible during fermentation. The cleaner the juice, the fruitier the white wine. The second thing that prevents that fruitiness from disappearing is cold fermentation. The third thing is aging in French oak barrels. These three elements have definitely improved white wines. I would say that the fourth factor is replanting the vineyards with the virus-free stock that are healthy vines. In other words, the better vineyards, the cool fermentation, the clean juice, and the aging in French oak are the elements which have improved white wine. Not all four of them for every kind of wine, but these four elements have played the biggest role. Then there is aging on the yeast, which is something new, and malolactic fermentation of white wines is something new. So there are five or six different factors which definitely have changed the longevity of the wines, the taste of the wine, and the value of the wine--white wines.

Red wines, I would say, were already much better fifty years ago than white wines, but then the replanting of vineyards with better vines helped give better grapes, and aging in the oak same thing--very important. Aging in the bottle, very important, and storing the wine at the correct temperature. Sterile filtering of wine prior to bottling prevents any bugs getting into the wine during bottling. There is a millipore filter that was manufactured in the sixties which screens all yeasts and the bacteria on the filter, so sterile wine goes in sterile bottles, and the wine is biologically stable forever.

These are all improvements, but for the stability of the wine, I think sterile filtration has done the more than anything

else. Before that, the wine could go through malolactic fermentation in the bottle, and when you opened the bottle it would be champagne coming out. That cannot happen if you sterile filter that wine before it goes into the bottle; it's biologically stable forever.

Teiser: Is there any equipment that has helped?

Grgich: I don't believe much in equipment, but for cool fermentation or for controlled fermentation, jacketed stainless steel tanks have helped. At the same time, the barrels--people did not have so many barrels as they do now. People are aging white wines and red wines in the barrel, and with much better barrels, too.

So we have better grapes in whites and reds. As far as cooperage is concerned, I would say that cool fermentation and the possibility of controlling fermentation temperature--and cooling the cellars, too, so that all year round the temperature is fifty to sixty degrees. That's all as far as equipment is concerned. There have been changes in presses, but not in such a revolutionary way.

I talked about the millipore filter, which was the one unit that I believe revolutionized the stability of the wine in bottles; wine can age in the bottle and not go through malolactic fermentation. Sterile filtration was really the big plus for us. While our wine on the shelf would be nice and good, many French wines were coming in with gassiness, sediment, and those type of things. The world wine industry now accepts millipore filtration, sterile filtration, just as we do. But we started it at Beaulieu Vineyard; the first successful millipore filtration was done there with André Tchelistcheff and myself. Gallo tried, Italian Swiss Colony tried, Guild tried; but nobody succeeded immediately. We succeeded, and we gave them reason to continue. Then from the wine industry it has spread to the beer industry. Before, people used to pasteurize wine in order to have it biologically stable. If it was sweet wine, they had to heat it, pasteurize it; but if you heat it, you get that boiled cooked character. This has eliminated that cooked character, and yet it has produced wine that is satisfying.

Teiser: Has there been any change in the character of the people in the industry?

Grgich: I think so. I think the old people at the beginning were very closed in; they would keep secret what they were doing. The new people tell each other; there are no secrets. I think Robert Mondavi has played a big role in that, because he was going around telling everybody what he was doing, so other people started doing

the same thing. Before that, when I came to Napa Valley, every winery was keeping everything kind of secret. But since then, Napa Valley Vintners' Association has been very active. They have a meeting once a month, and through that organization people discuss common interests as far as the law is concerned and as far as quality is concerned. The vintners love each other. At the beginning they were competing, like in any other industry, but I think the wine industry is superb in that respect. We each love each other; we do not hate each other, winery to winery. We are proud of one another, and we are not afraid that someone else is making a better wine, because that forces you to make better wine, too. So it's positive. That attitude is superb.

Teiser: That's a fine note to stop on. I thank you very much for this interview.

Transcriber and Final Typist: Judy Smith

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